魔法科高校の劣等生16

四葉継承編

The irregular at magic high school

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida

電撃文庫

佐島勤
Tsutomu Sato
illustration／石田可奈
Kana Ishida
illustrator assistant／シリー・ストーン、末永康子
design／BEE-PEE
魔法科高校の劣等生
The irregular at magic high school
四葉継承編
16

『お礼遣い感謝いたします……』
『――深雪が自分の妹でない
などということはあり得ない』
「深雪さん、貴方の婚約相手は
達也さんです」
《貴女が本当に嫌なのは、
お兄様以外の男性の妻になること》
「やめて……！
これは仕方の無いことなのよ！」
司波深雪
しば・みゆき
2年A組。達也の妹。昨年主席入学した優等生。冷却魔法が得意。兄を溺愛する『重度のブラコン』。
司波達也
しば・たつや
司波兄妹の兄。第一高校2年E組所属。妹である深雪を『ガーディアン』として守るべき存在だと認識していること以外、全てに達観している。
四葉真夜
よつば・まや
達也と深雪の叔母。深夜の双子の妹。とある不幸な事件によって心が崩れかけていたが、深夜の精神構造干渉魔法によって立ち直る。四葉家の現当主。

津久葉夕歌 つくば・ゆうか

「今度の慶春会だけど、本家までご一緒しない？」

四葉家次期当主候補の一人。年齢22歳。第一高校の元・生徒会副会長。ただし副会長になったのは二年の二学期から三年の一学期まで。重傷者を出した2091年の生徒会長選挙で、同級生だった副会長が生徒会長に就任するに伴い、新生徒会長に請われて生徒会入りした。現在は魔法大学四年生。精神干渉系魔法全般に強く、その適正は夕歌の母、津久葉家当主・冬歌（とうか）譲りで非常に優れている。

新発田勝成 しばた・かつしげ

「……私が達也君と戦う」

四葉家次期当主候補の一人。年齢23歳。防衛省の職員。第五高校のOB（ただし高校在学中は魔法力を隠していた）。収束系魔法「密度操作」を得意とする。「密度操作」はその名称のとおり、気体、液体、固体を問わず物質の密度を直接操作する魔法。気体を圧縮して爆弾を作る、水を圧縮してウォーターカッターを作り出す、固体の密度を下げて亀裂を生じさせるなど、応用範囲が広い。

堤 琴鳴 つつみ・ことな

「あたしのことを信じてくれないんですか？」

新発田勝成のガーディアン。年齢24歳。調整体「楽師シリーズ」の第二世代。勝成と同じく魔法大学卒業、第五高校OB（主の為に年齢を1歳誤魔化して高校に通っていた）。音に関する魔法に高い適性を持つ。

堤 奏太 つつみ・かなた

「マスター、やらせてくださいよ」

新発田勝成のガーディアン。年齢20歳。調整体「楽師シリーズ」の第二世代。魔法大学2年生。姉・琴鳴よりも喧嘩っ早く血の気が多い。彼女と同じく音に関する魔法に高い適性を持つ。

Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei Volume 16 – Yotsuba's Succession

Chapter 1

The bell signifying the end of class rang.

Even though all the courses were now conducted online and there were no teachers during the classes, there was no change in the feeling of freedom that came at the end of school.

Especially now that the school was self-reigned.

It was to be expected. Today was the last day of the second semester, Tuesday, December 25th, 2096 A.D.

Contrary to how it usually was, the class ended in the morning. There was no closing ceremony in correspondence to this.

There was no end-of-the-year report, either. In fact, the performance of each student was his or her own responsibility. The parents were only involved when the student was in danger of not graduating.

Still, throughout the year, students were unable to access their own personal evaluation due to the lack of general subject periodic tests. Therefore, the scenes occurring now were divided between students who were in a good mood and those with heavy shoulders.

The newly established Magic Engineering Class, Class 2-E, was no exception to this; everyone was checking their results, both Tatsuya and his classmates alike. Even though he did not need to worry about practical grades ever since he entered the Magic Engineering Course, he was still worried over whether or not he had enough credits to advance.

For the time being, he double-checked that he had received satisfactory results. As Tatsuya stood up and saved his evaluation data onto his portable terminal, he felt a stare from his side.

"Mizuki, do you need something?"

Mizuki answered Tatsuya's question in an articulate manner, as if it was something bad.

"No… It's not important."

She wanted to ask about his test results but stopped herself when she realized that she would have to answer that question as well. Mizuki's results had exceeded the class average, yet, if she heard Tatsuya's results, she probably wouldn't have the courage to disclose hers.

"Is that so? Well then, see you later." "Yes, see you later."

They exchanged farewells before Tatsuya departed for the Student Council Office while Mizuki went to the Art Room.

By 5:30 P.M., the sky had turned completely dark. After the Club Activities and Student Council work, Tatsuya and his friends gathered at Einebrise, a café located on the road heading towards the school. They often frequented this place and were regarded as loyal customers.

"Well then, we're late one day, but never mind, shout with me!" Following Erika's urging, they raised their voices in unison. "Merry Christmas!"

This year, the Christmas party at Einebrise had been moved to at night due to Tatsuya and his friends' availability issues.

"Thanks for joining in! I would have preferred to do it during the day, though."

"We had no choice. Erika, don't you have Club Activities as well?" Erika gave a wry smile in response to Miyuki's words.

"Mine doesn't require so much commitment though. But it's different for Miyuki, right? Since you're the Student Council President now."

“I’m not the only one. Yoshida-kun’s the Disciplinary Committee Chairman, and Shizuku as a member of the Disciplinary Committee also needs to fulfill her responsibilities there, right?"

After being denied by Miyuki, Mikihiko laughed bashfully and Shizuku answered ‘yup’ shortly.

“Right, Leo aside.”

“What do you mean by that!?”

“Honoka is in the Student Council, and Tatsuya-kun is the ‘Secretary General’ after all.”

Paying no attention to Leo’s protest, Erika transferred her line of sight subtly to Tatsuya.

“Isn’t this alright? Regardless of the fact that we’re a day late, we were able to gather everyone by doing this.”

Tatsuya was subtly shifting the conversation with his answer, but Erika didn’t notice it and gave a "Well, you’re right" response.

“After all, there were many of us that could not make it yesterday.”

By the way, yesterday, Shizuku was attending one of her father’s company’s parties. Honoka was pulled into it because she was "just like a daughter".

Mikihiko was dragged to a party held by his family that was open for the apprentices. Since participating members were mostly female, Mikihiko resisted with all his might, but he was forced by his brother to go to the ‘supervise’ party.

Erika herself was dragged at her family’s convenience to attend a party against her will. In her case, she went to the Kanto Region’s police party along with her eldest brother, Toshikazu, instead of the Chiba Family’s party. It was set that way due to her father, the Head of the Family, needing to attend a party with influential politicians. Toshikazu was reluctant to go, but he was defeated by his father’s order. Her role as a

companion for Toshikazu was due to him not having a spouse or fiancé. Hence, Erika was angry and showered her eldest brother with sarcasm throughout the party.

Those were the reasons the Christmas party was held today instead of yesterday.

The participating members of this party were all from the second year: Tatsuya, Miyuki, Erika, Leo, Mizuki, Mikihiko, Honoka and Shizuku. Minami had been invited to Class 1-C's Christmas party. They couldn't hold the party on Christmas Eve due to similar reasons. That party was held at a famous restaurant and the food was delivered in several stages; a much more grandiose party than that of Tatsuya's group. Kasumi, who was also in Class 1-C, had dragged Izumi along.

Given that both Kasumi and Izumi had to be on their best behaviours yesterday at the Saegusa Family's party, they were able to act more freely today. This alleviated concerns that they were going to go too far, so her classmates turned a blind eye to Izumi's actions. There was some speculation that this might be due to her being unable to attend the same party as Miyuki.

That being said, Tatsuya's group's party felt similar to a tea party with classmates.

On the other hand, Minami's group had a full-course dinner. Even the cakes were sliced for each person, and the taste of the cuisine had been arranged by taste-orientation instead of volume. Conversing was only done during the time when one wasn't using their mouth to eat or drink——was what Leo said, but there might be some objection to that statement as the conversation was going without interruption for about an hour and a half until 7 P.M., before the meals were even served.

"This year has almost ended."

There was no mistake to the reason why Mizuki had heartily said such a thing when it eventually came time for the party to start ending, though silly discussions exchanged clamorously was a fun thing to do.

"It was a peaceful year, right?"

Erika replied in a cheerful voice, neglecting the sentimental atmosphere. “I wonder... I think it was pretty hectic.”

Mikihiko answered reflexively with his true feelings. “There was even some turmoil due to the vampires.” “Like the Pixie Confession Incident.”

However, Honoka kept her silence without saying a word at Mikihiko’s words; instead, it was Shizuku who came up with a sharp retort and made everyone laugh.

“Shizuku, don’t say it!”

Even if she felt sorry for Honoka, in the end, she would say that it was ‘nicely played’.

“I do not intend to support Erika, but this year, I’ve definitely been caught up in less turmoil compared to last year. We didn’t get dragged into an incident like what happened at Yokohama.”

“As if that kind of thing would happen every year.” Tatsuya gave a short laugh and was unable to refute Leo. “Well, that’s true.”

Laughter of approval went up from everyone, including Leo.

“Tatsuya-san.”

At 7 P.M., immediately after their party was over——they did not linger in the store——when everyone was outside of the shop, Tatsuya was startled by Honoka’s voice.

“Are you going to Hatsumōde next year?”

Before Tatsuya turned his head, Honoka had invited him to the New Year's visit to a Shinto shrine.

“Hmm… Hatsumōde.”

Honoka overreacted to Tatsuya’s words and started moving her hands in a hurry.

“Oh, everyone! Let’s go with everyone. Shizuku will come with us, too, and Erika can also come.”

Apparently, Honoka had done some preparation beforehand. The feeling expressed was not just some random ad hoc thing, but that of enthusiasm.

“I'm sorry."

That was why it pained Tatsuya for not being able to return that feeling.
“Miyuki and I have errands to do this upcoming New Year.”

Honoka was quite shocked; she hadn’t anticipated that he would reject her invitation.

“Even though you invited...” “No, don’t mind it.”

But before Tatsuya had finished his apology, her pouting face had changed to a smile and halted his words.

“It can’t be helped if you have an important errand.”

It couldn't be said that she was smiling naturally, but Honoka maintained it to the end.

She couldn’t possibly waste the blatant concern that had been offered by Tatsuya.

“Please invite me again in the future.”

Instead of apologizing, Tatsuya rephrased his sentence.

The exchange between Tatsuya and Honoka ended without any awkwardness. But, next to Tatsuya, Miyuki slumped her head and wore a darkened face.

“Miyuki, what’s wrong?”

When Shizuku noticed, she asked her in a worried voice. Miyuki's face was pale like that of a sick person.

"Are you not feeling well?"

Shizuku doubted the possibility of sudden illness. "…No, I'm alright. Thank you."

After she answered, Miyuki's face remained pale and the smile she offered was also faint. That being said, this appearance suited Miyuki perfectly well, although Shizuku as a friend couldn't bluntly tell her that.

However, Erika was not able to perceive the meaning of the dark complexion on Miyuki's face.

"It's just not going to Hatsumōde; you don't need to make a big deal out of it. I never really worry about it, and you'd only miss it this year. As Honoka said, Miyuki has an important errand, right? Then, contact us once you're done. Let's meet up again somewhere."

Erika was not a heartless girl. If she didn't pacify Miyuki, Tatsuya would——It was an action anyone could do. Putting that aside, Erika thought that Miyuki was acting somewhat strange, but she did indeed lighten the burden in Miyuki's heart.

"Yeah. I'll contact you when I've completed my errands."

Miyuki showed a somewhat better smile as a response. Still, her face remained pale.

◊ ◊ ◊

Miyuki's anxiety was temporary, and her complexion had returned to normal by the time she reached home.

Erika’s reasoning was correct. Miyuki did not weaken due to physical stress. For Tatsuya, that was the most obvious thing in the world.

Miyuki had become pale due to mental shock. Over the past few days, she had been worrying over the "New Year's Gathering", which had resurfaced automatically at the keyword. In other words, regardless of her own wishes, she had been subconsciously mulling over this upcoming event. Tatsuya understood this well.

"Miyuki, why don’t you rest for a while in your room? You can prepare the food later."

Regardless of the party snacks and desserts, Tatsuya decided that she must have some rest first.

“Such a thing!”

Miyuki was about to raise her voice in rebuttal on reflex, but what came out was "...Yes, I understand." She was well aware that her physical condition was far from adequate to prepare the best service to her brother and immediately switched responses.

"Are you sure you want to let me rest even for about an hour?"

Still, Miyuki was not so naive as to think that Tatsuya’s kind words were not empty, so she’d rather excuse herself now than fawn over it.

“Of course. It’s because I also want to rest first."

Tatsuya answered so with a laugh. “No... Miyuki, please rest in your room until you feel better.” He changed his words immediately.

Miyuki retreated with “Yes, Onii-sama. I’ll do as you say.”

Miyuki lightly bowed. By being ordered ‘you are to rest’ rather than ‘you may rest’ her guilt was greatly reduced.

The second floor was cold due to the midwinter season. Even if modern architecture made full use of heat insulation material, it was still difficult to keep warm air in the room for more than 12 hours in late December.

In the first place, keeping the room warm upon returning could be done using home automation. It was common technology nowadays.

But Miyuki did not use that function. There was no need to do that.

When Miyuki opened the door, there was a warning sign that the room was chilly.

With that, she re-adjusted the temperature of the room.

Miyuki did not require the help of a CAD for this degree of magic.

Miyuki entered her room, closed the door and turned on the heater. If the task was to continuously heat the indoor air, air conditioning was more suitable than magic.

She then took off her coat and uniform.

No matter how tired she was, she wouldn't throw off her clothes unkemptly over the chair. She hung them one by one starting from the long coat, then her blazer, inner gown, and one piece dress. After that, she started mulling over which clothes to wear that night. She chose an unusual house-wear; a long loose-fitted one piece dress, and looked at her appearance in the mirror.

After she finished changing clothes, she sat at her desk and reached out to an envelope from the letter rack.

Without even looking, she knew very well what was written inside. She had already read it so many times, enough to memorize it. Troubled, Miyuki spread out the letter from the envelope.

The letter was an invitation to participate in the succession procession of the Yotsuba.

For the past two years, Miyuki had visited the Main House every New Year's. However, she didn't turn out for the meeting with the Branch Families' Heads. The first reason being she was 'not invited', so Miyuki, fortunately, could avoid the match for the family head position with the

Branch Families. She couldn't bear the irreverent words and deeds from the Branch Families against Tatsuya.

But this year, she received a personal invitation from Maya, no, she was ordered to come. Moreover, Maya personally signed the letter. Even though she was very reluctant, she couldn't escape this time. Also, her aunt made sure that the Branch Families 'would stop' their hostilities towards Tatsuya. She was not sure how much she could restrain herself which made Miyuki quite anxious.

However, it was but a trivial exit over this invisible problem she had.

Miyuki had a pretty strong conviction rather than a vague one as to why her aunt had called her to this family meeting.

——My aunt is finally appointing the next Family Head.

——My aunt wants to nominate me as the next Head of the Family. The current Miyuki had no desire whatsoever for that position.

In the past, there were times when she wanted to become the Head. But since that summer four years ago, that had never been her desire anymore.

Originally, she felt that she 'wanted to be the Head'; that feeling was not only from the adults' persuasion but from her pride as 'one who is worthy of becoming Family Head' in her mind. No, that thought had not changed up to now.

The Head of the Yotsuba Family is the most excellent; the strongest in the Family. There were several candidates remaining for the position: Shiba Miyuki, Kuroba Fumiya, Tsukuba Yuuka, and Shibata Katsushige. And then, the strongest Magician of them all was Miyuki. So she had the biggest chance to be appointed as the next Head.

As expected of the Head Butler, Hayama had asked Butler Hanabishi to make all sorts of arrangements and adjustments in the facilities. Even though he was not in the Main House, there was no one who was light-

mouthed among the Yotsuba's employees. But, she still received much flattery that she was the best candidate.

Miyuki also thought that she had the most excellent magic ability as the candidate for the next Head. It was not only overconfidence but an objective judgment. But to be able to get appointed due to this, as the next Head of the Family itself, was evidence of the imprinted values of the Yotsuba.

However, if someone asked her, "Do you want to become the Family Head?" She would answer, "Not interested." If she had the choice, she would have done so, since the work of the Head would curb her time with her brother.

At the same time, to 'refuse the status of Yotsuba Head' was something that was unthinkable for Miyuki. Even if there was no value for herself, if she could improve the treatment given to her brother, she thought that it was not that bad of an option.

As the Head of the Family, she could at least eliminate the hatred towards her brother from the employees. Even the Branch Families could be asked to somehow respect him. Miyuki thought that if she did it for her brother, she'd be able to bear the role.

To be appointed as the next Head, it was not the source of the anxiety. The problem was the marriage partner that had always been associated with the position of becoming the Head.

Magicians were encouraged to marry early. Unless under special circumstances like her aunt, being single was not allowed. Even for Magicians, there were fundamental human rights that were recognized, and there should be no penalties for being single. However, to meet the expectations of the magic community, marriage was inevitable.

Especially since the Yotsuba was one of the Ten Master Clans, regardless of the aloof presence perceived by outsiders, she couldn't help but worry about the family's reputation among fellow Magicians.

In that sense, a higher responsibility fell onto the next Head to be married to a member of the Ten Master Clans, as Maya was single. It was not as if she would be forced to get married as soon as she was named as the head, but a fiancé must be appointed.

——I will be married to a man other than my brother.

——To be someone else's wife other than my brother's.

For that matter itself, Miyuki had understood it simply. She couldn't possibly marry her own brother and as a Magician, her freedom to choose her partner would be limited. She would need to marry a man other than her brother; this was an inevitable situation for her.

Miyuki stood up and returned the envelope to the letterbox.

As she sat in front of the dressing table today, her heart spoke out to her reflection in the mirror.

(Yes, this is unavoidable. I can't do anything about it.) Her reflection in the mirror replied:

< Is it? Is that really the case? Are you really pleased with this? >

The voice given from her reflection was from her younger self.

(Yes, it is an undeniable fact that Onii-sama and I are real siblings. I have accepted that fact.)

Miyuki was talking to the girl in the mirror, while trying to convince herself.

< You're lying! I would never agree to this! >

The "Miyuki" within the mirror was a little bit younger than her, and a little bit more honest than her.

(No matter how much you try to convince me, I won't be convinced, 'Miyuki'. Because Onii-sama and I are real siblings.)

< Did you give up because you are siblings!? >

(It doesn't matter whether or not I give up. Siblings cannot marry each other. I knew this from the beginning, and I never hoped to love Onii sama as a woman. If I never hoped for it in the first place, there isn't anything to give up, right?)

< You're lying! Then, why is "Miyuki" so against this unknown fiancé who may not even exist? >

(Isn't it a mother's duty to be married and have children? I would only be a burden to Onii-sama that way.)

< You can hire a babysitter. The Head of the Yotsuba will be busy with her work so there's no way you can afford to spend your time with children. >

Miyuki stared hard at her reflection in the mirror. She didn't realize that her arguments were shallow and easily thrown off.

The girl in the mirror began to speak. Miyuki was provoked by her inability to face her inner self.

< Even if you are married to another man, Onii-sama still has other roles. You don't even need love in marrying "that man", as long as you fulfill your duty as a Magician. So long as you have children, nobody's going to say anything. "Miyuki", what you really object to is not the marriage itself. >

(Stop!)

Miyuki wanted to cover her ears.

< "Miyuki", what you really object to is... > (Stop!)

She wanted to turn away from the mirror.

< What you really object to is… > (Stop!)

No matter how hard she shook her head, she couldn't stop the voice.

< To be anyone's wife besides Onii-sama's. >

Yet, she couldn't stand up against her own heart any longer.

< To be embraced by anyone besides Onii-sama. >

She saw a pair of distraught eyes in the mirror. She never wanted to have these thoughts.

< Unable to become Onii-sama's bride. Unable to make love to Onii-sama. Unable to love Onii-sama as a woman! >

"Ah!"

She let out the grieving sound with trembling lips, and fell down from the chair she'd been sitting on.

She was freed from her curse now that the mirror was out of sight. "It can't be helped."

She let her thoughts be sounded by her voice, and her conflicting emotions converged.

"I'm Onii-sama's sister. I'm his true sibling."

The feelings that she could no longer keep within her heart started to find its way out.

"It's unforgivable to love my brother as a woman. The world will not tolerate it. Even Onii-sama will think that it's abnormal. He will certainly think that it's disgusting."

All alone in her room, Miyuki gave in to all her emotions. Nobody else could hear her saying those words.

There wasn't a hint of a lie in those words.

“I don’t care what the world thinks. If they want to point their fingers at my back, I’d take the fall. But if Onii-sama thought of me as disgusting… I wouldn’t be able to stand it!”

She never thought that her feelings were so sinful.

The only one who could give forgiveness to her was not God. “That’s why, it can’t be helped.”

Miyuki stopped her confession. Her feelings turned to words, then to tears, and overflowed from her eyes.

Chapter 2

Early in the morning on the first day of winter break, Tatsuya went to the FLT Third Division.

Miyuki and Minami stayed at home. The FLT Third Division could be said to be his home ground and he was always welcome there. Even Tatsuya knew this. That day, he chose to go to the lab because the server at home was slower. So, he spent his time at home carefully thinking about the project.

He was scheduled to begin the new project from this day onwards. Rather than the development of a new CAD, he was designing a large-scale system using Magic Engineering. The project implementation date was yet to be known. In the first place, it was impossible to complete such a large-scale project with only the work of FLT.

The project name was ‘ESCAPES’ (Extract both useful and harmful Substances from the Coastal Area of the Pacific using Electricity generated by the Stellar generator). It was a project to access substances from the depths of the sea in the Pacific Ocean's coastal region by means of a Stellar Furnace, but in a sense it was also a ‘means of escape’ or ‘free the substances’.

At the current stage, he still needed to wait to incorporate the design into the system and create the plan proposal. Still, it was a huge step closer to his goal.

He had this idea about three years ago in 2093, a year after the Okinawa Incident in August. The Loop Cast System, Flight Magic as well as the Stellar Furnace were developed for the heart of this system, and he managed to gather the last piece the other day. Whether it was this project or Tatsuya, both of them still had a long way to go. That aside, given the significance of the project, it was unavoidable for him to be fired up.

However, his enthusiasm was suddenly washed over by cold water after an hour of work.

“Sorry for bothering you, Young Master.”

Transmissions using quantum encryption were taboo. As Tatsuya was viewing some highly confidential data, he received a call from a female secretary from FLT's Third Division.

“What is it?”

He did not want to stop working, however, the reason must be quite important if the secretary had knowingly disturbed him. Tatsuya stopped typing to hit the intercom button to reply.

“Excuse me, Kuroba Mitsugu wishes to see you, Young Master. What should I tell him?”

Tatsuya’s eyebrows rose unconsciously.

Mitsugu had not visited FLT before, as far as Tatsuya knew. As Mitsugu’s work entailed the collection of intelligence for the Yotsuba, he would have no reason to visit FLT, which was in the commerce/financial division of the Yotsuba.

“I will see him. Please bring light snacks to the offline reception.”

He did not have enough information to guess the purpose of Mitsugu's visit. Tatsuya realized that at once.

He needed to make sure of what the purpose of this visit was. That was his reason for asking the staff to guide Mitsugu to a room which was not equipped with an online monitoring system.

Tatsuya made sure to lock the waiting room before greeting Mitsugu.

As he approached Mitsugu, Mitsugu did not seem to have any intention of rising from the sofa. Instead, he noticed that Mitsugu was playing with his fingers anxiously and left his hat on the sofa which was a sign of uneasiness ever since he went inside.

"Long time no see, Kuroba-san. The last time was during the summer right?"

"Yeah."

Mitsugu nodded his head impatiently. His behavior did not seem to be affected only by the bitter memories of the deep wound inflicted by Zhou Gongjin 'last summer'. He seemed to be on edge even before Tatsuya showed up.

"May I sit?"

Mitsugu nodded in silence, while Tatsuya took the seat opposite to him.

Tatsuya fixed his eyes straight at Mitsugu. There was a large age gap, like that of a parent and child, between the two of them. However, it didn't make Tatsuya nervous at all. There was no hint of bravado in his posture either.

Mitsugu distorted his lips in his upset. Even now, it seemed like he was going to cluck his tongue.

However, Mitsugu did not look down on Tatsuya as a 'mere escort'. Tatsuya was regarded as a failure of the Yotsuba Family, despite being

the nephew of Yotsuba Maya, the current Family Head, and also the brother of Miyuki, the candidate for the next Family Head, especially among the non-combatant servants. As he ‘did not have the suitable magic power, despite having a direct blood relation to the Yotsuba’, he was ‘given the role of guardian to his sister out of pity’.

However, Mitsugu knew very well that Tatsuya wasn’t a ‘failure’. Certainly, he could be counted as one based on the current Magicians' standards, but he had a special power that was more than enough to compensate for this flaw. Mitsugu understood this very well.

The upsetness that Mitsugu showed to Tatsuya, was due to the fact that Tatsuya saw him as an equal, despite Tatsuya’s age that was not so different with that of his own son.

He couldn’t afford to be seen as such. Instead, the one with bravado and trying to push himself unconsciously, perhaps, was Mitsugu himself.

“What business do you have with me?”

Tatsuya asked so when Mitsugu did not show any signs that he would start talking. He did not say "I’m busy now", but the way he said it had that nuance. Of course, this was on purpose.

Although this was a rude way to say something to someone, no, to a senior, Mitsugu restrained himself. He figured that it was unbefitting of him to be upset over such a trivial issue, given that he was the one who paid a visit, hence, he kept it to himself.

“Do not come to the New Year’s Gathering.”

Without feeling the need to cover up the words that he had just said, Mitsugu came only to say those words bluntly to Tatsuya.

“I never had any intention to come.” “What…?”

However, Mitsugu probably never expected this kind of answer from Tatsuya. The sulky face that had been directed to Tatsuya since he

entered the room suddenly faded from Mitsugu's face. Currently, he was wearing an unguarded surprised expression on his face.

"I have no intention of attending the New Year's Gathering. The order from Toushu-sama was only given to Miyuki."

Tatsuya called Maya 'Toushu-sama' instead of 'Oba-ue'. Implicitly, he was trying to say that Miyuki's attendance was ordered by the Head of the Family; it was not to be countered by the unreasonable request of Mitsugu.

"How quibbling…!"

Mitsugu clucked his tongue. It seemed like he chose to abandon his effort to cover up his frustration, once his real face was revealed.

"Then, I want you to persuade your sister not to come to the New Year's Gathering."

However, he said this with less intensity. Mitsugu probably realized that he wouldn't win against Tatsuya and his tone was also somewhat tempered.

It didn't mean that Tatsuya was going to accept the request, regardless of the politeness with which it was delivered.

"Why don't you say it directly to her?"

Even Mitsugu himself knew that he was bound to be rejected. However, Tatsuya brought the conversation to a slightly different direction than what he was expecting.

"She wouldn't do so even if I told her to. That's why I'm asking you to."

"I was not referring to Miyuki. Why didn't you directly request Toushu-sama herself to retract the attendance order?"

Mitsugu was speechless for a moment.

"….I don't need you to tell me that. I have discussed with Maya-san about her decision possibly being premature."

"Then, there is no meaning for Miyuki and I to be absent from the New Year's Gathering. Even if we decline, there is no way Toushu-sama would tolerate it."

Perhaps, Mitsugu was considering Tatsuya's words and fell into silence. Tatsuya smirked wickedly, yet meaningfully.

"I can understand that it's still premature for Fumiya as he still needs a few more experiences to make a male Family Head."

"That's an unjust suspicion!"

Mitsugu replied with a strong voice. He lifted his right hand from his armrest, albeit squeezing it tightly in the middle and stopped; he was restraining himself from hitting the table reflexively.

"Originally, I was reluctant to make Fumiya the Head of the Yotsuba Family. His personality is too kind to lead the Yotsuba Clan. I think that in terms of Magic Power, Miyuki is suitable to be the next Family Head."

Tatsuya could not suppress his surprise when he heard Mitsugu's rebuttal. Tatsuya always thought that Mitsugu wanted Fumiya to be the Head of the Yotsuba Family.

"Then, why do you think it is still premature?"

However, Tatsuya chose to keep his misunderstanding to himself for now. It was more important to stick with his priority to figure out Mitsugu's intention.

Mitsugu was hesitant to answer and swallowed his breath. He returned to face Tatsuya with a defiant attitude.

"At the New Year's Gathering, we will be deciding the next Family Head. Maya-san wishes for Miyuki's appointment."

"I see."

Although he said it this way, he had already foreseen this.

“However, I believe we need to postpone Miyuki’s nomination as the next Family Head to take care of a more important thing. It’s not only me. Shiiba, Mashiba, Shibata and Shizuku, also have the same idea.”

“So it’s the consensual decision of the Heads of the Branch Families, with the exception of Mugura and Tsukuba. Then, what is the important issue?”

“It’s about what we are going to do with you.”

Mitsugu grinned. It was a dark smile, one that harbored a dark feeling.

“In about two years, the 'Sakura Series' modified body, Sakurai Minami, will have sufficient enough power as a Yotsuba Guardian. That girl is particularly excellent even when compared to other modified bodies made by the Yotsuba. When that happens, your duty as a Guardian will become obsolete.”

Unlike his usual self, there was a hint that Mitsugu was intoxicated with his own words.

“Don’t worry. We’ll let you graduate from Magic University. You can contribute to Yotsuba’s financial activities as ‘Taurus Silver’ afterwards. There’s no need for you to continue your work in the JSDF either. We’ll release you from your secret military duty.”

Mitsugu’s eyes were still enveloped in darkness, he lifted the edge of his lips further.

“Ah, that’s right. You will replace your father's position in FLT. Although your existence will never be published as the president, you will still be the largest shareholder.”

“I have no interest in such things.”

Tatsuya cut off Mitsugu’s words with a bored voice.

“The things that you’ve said just now are not to be decided at Kuroba-san’s discretion.”

Tatsuya implicitly said that Maya was the one to decide those.

“Such a verbal agreement can be interpreted as an intention to revolt.”
“….No, I have no such intention.”

The wicked smile disappeared from Mitsugu’s face as if the demon who had possessed him had left.

Perhaps, he realized that he was not acting like himself, Mitsugu’s head was facing down again in silence.

“Kuroba-san, the one who ordered Miyuki’s attendance for the New Year’s Gathering is Toushu-sama, Oba-ue. Miyuki and I can’t just be absent on our own discretion. You should understand that much right?”

“Even so.”

While keeping his eyes on the table at the reception room, Mitsugu said so in a low voice.

“I don’t wish to make Fumiya and Ayako sad.” Tatsuya narrowed his eyes sharply.

“Are you sure?”

Mitsugu raised his face, and stared straight at Tatsuya.

“I have said to you that I don’t wish to make them sad. I won’t do anything.”

“So you will wait and see from the sidelines?”

“I’m neutral. Although sentimentally speaking, I am your enemy, but I won’t do anything for the sake of my children.”

Mitsugu erased the remaining traces of hostility and declared so. Tatsuya perceived that as a fact.

“Why do you wish to separate Miyuki and I? You didn’t answer this despite giving me that other explanation.”

Mitsugu rose.

“I’ll answer you if you arrive at the Main House on time.”

Mitsugu looked down at Tatsuya while saying so in place of a farewell.

◊ ◊ ◊

On the first day of the winter holiday, Miyuki was spending her time doing her homework when an unexpected visitor arrived sometime after she had eaten lunch.

“Miyuki-san, long time no see. You look very well.” “Yuuka-san also hasn’t changed. Please take a seat.”

The visitor who sat opposite to Miyuki in the living room was Tsukuba Yuuka. She was the eldest daughter of the Tsukuba Family, a Branch Family of the Yotsuba Family. She was also one of the candidates to be the next Family Head.

She was 22 years old. She was a former vice president of First High's Student Council, currently in her fourth year at the Magic University. She had black hair at shoulder length with a 6:4 fringe ratio and styled in a way that revealed the piercings in her right ear. With perfect make up, she appeared to be a refined female college student.

The relationship between Miyuki and Yuuka, if summarized in a single word, was neutral. Alternatively, mutual non-intervention. She was not competitive like Ayako, or intimate like Fumiya, neither was she as hostile as Katsushige, the other Family Head candidate, the Shibata Family’s eldest son. Therefore, it was quite surprising that she paid a visit this way. It was much more likely for Katsushige to come and declare war in this situation.

Nevertheless, Yuuka was not hostile toward Miyuki. They were of equal standing in being candidates to be the next Head of the Yotsuba Family. It was a given to let her in if she was coming to pay a visit, unless she came at an unearthly hour.

“It’s been about a year, since the last time we met at last New Year's Gathering.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Even if we both live in Tokyo, the opportunity to see each other is unexpectedly scarce.”

“Tokyo is huge after all.”

“You’re right. It certainly feels so in times like these. Miyuki-san, you’re a sophomore in First High, right? Are you the Student Council President?”

“Yes, you’re well informed.”

“It is my alma mater after all. You have had quite a loud achievement, haven’t you?”

“I know it’s not favorable to attract so much attention at this stage, but I think it’s rude to hold back toward my opponents… Yuuka-san, you’ll be graduating soon right?”

“Yes. Although, I will be continuing into graduate school.” “You will not directly proceed to help the Main House?”

“Seems like they want me to increase my value a little bit. At this late hour.”

While she neutrally answered Miyuki, Minami brought out the tea.

Although she was trying to be as natural as possible with her words, it was actually quite awkward. The phrase Yuuka used earlier, 'loud achievements', actually carried a deeper meaning which was ‘is it alright to be so conspicuous’ while Miyuki answered by explicitly saying ‘I

know, but it's rude to hold back my power' in return. By answering so, she was criticizing Yuuka, who was hiding her power during her high school days.

After which, Miyuki asked if it was alright for her not to help the Main House, although her real question was 'is it alright to leak out the Yotsuba's secret technology to the university?'.

Regardless of her capability in engaging such a nasty tactic, it didn't fit Miyuki's taste. She was actually thankful for the arrival of tea at the right time to bring back the focus of the conversation.

"Then, Yuuka-san, what business do you have with me today?"

Miyuki and Yuuka brought back their cups to the saucers at the same time, and Miyuki asked her about the main issue.

At Miyuki's straightforward question, Yuuka stopped beating around the bush.

"Why don't we go together to the Main House for the upcoming New Year's Gathering?"

"…Is that, an invitation to go to the Main House from Tokyo together?" "Yes. Since I have a car, we can ride together."

"Is it alright for me to hear your reason?"

Miyuki couldn't hide the wariness that had been welling up in her mind. It was unavoidable. After all, Yuuka was one of her rivals as a candidate for the next Family Head position. They had minimal exchanges even if she was a relative, so she was not so different as a stranger is in everyday life; she knew nothing about her besides her face.

Although her approach in this negotiation was rather immature, Yuuka paid no care about it. Yuuka, unlike most others, did not overestimate Miyuki's halo effect. Even if Miyuki had both good looks and magic power, she was still a 16-year-old girl, a girl who was younger than Yuuka by 6 years. Yuuka clearly understood this.

"Reason, huh. Do I need to say it?"

Yuuka tried to avoid the topic by sweetly looking up at Miyuki. Miyuki responded with a cold look to that act of hers.

"I understand."

Yuuka didn't seem to seriously cheat her way out so she dropped her playful attitude immediately.

"My foremost reason is because my escort is gone." "No longer around? Yuuka-san's Guardian is——"

Yuuka closed her eyes and shook her head several times to stop Miyuki from getting up from the sofa.

“She is no longer around. That is to say that she died before my very eyes.”

Miyuki covered her mouth only for a short time, before blinking again.

Miyuki was ashamed of her own ignorance. It was a given to understand that ‘no longer around’ was hinting at ‘has been killed’ if she had thought harder.

Although Yuuka was already an adult, she was a Magician of the Yotsuba. With her versatility with magic, it was rare for her to receive dangerous work requests, but it was not impossible. In other words, the possibility of her Guardian getting killed in a mission was not zero.

Moreover, she was a rare magician with a high aptitude in Outer Systematic Mental Interference Magic. There were also those who targeted her for her genetic qualities, knowing her magic beforehand.

“My… Condolences.”

Miyuki respectfully bowed, to which Yuuka shook her head from left to right for.

“Such an expression is not suitable. Her work was to risk her life to protect me, and she was fulfilling her responsibility. She has no need to worry anymore about being my substitute. If the other world is real, she must be breathing in relief that she no longer has a need to be ordered around at the mercy of a pampered girl.”

Yuuka’s excessively honest comments were making Miyuki uncomfortable.

“Even though it’s the job of a Guardian, to make fun of someone who protected you with her own life… I wonder if that’s appropriate?”

Yuuka was shocked and blinked her eyes countless times.

“It’s because Miyuki-san’s Guardian is your own older brother. I’m sorry for inciting an unpleasant feeling.”

On the surface, Yuuka honestly bowed. However, her words seemed to hint at other feelings, so Miyuki did not really receive the supposedly honest apology from Yuuka.

“It is not unique to my brother and I. Putting aside the fact that Fumiya-kun does not have a Guardian, Katsushige-san does properly treasure Kotona-san, right?”

Tsutsumi Kotona was Shibata Katsushige’s Guardian, and it was an indisputable fact that Katsushige was taking care of Kotona. However, that case was an inappropriate example. Contrary to Miyuki’s intention to encourage Yuuka to reflect, it made her laugh calmly instead.

“Well, Katsushige-san and Kotona-san are like 'that' after all.”

Miyuki turned her stare aside in disappointment at Yuuka who continued to laugh and giggle. She couldn’t deny the blunder that she’d just made.

“Anyway, without having Onii-sama and I together with you, you can arrange an escort immediately right? Unlike us, Yuuka-san, you have the Tsukuba Family with you after all.”

Yuuka stopped laughing, she saw the glance from Miyuki. “Well, that’s true.”

Yuuka sat upright towards her.

“It’s hard to find someone who’s on par with your brother… Moreover, it’s not bad for Miyuki-san, too, right? It’s impossible to take a taxi all the way to the Main House after all, and Tatsuya-san only has a license for a motorbike right?”

Indeed, she couldn’t exactly tell a taxi driver to drive all the way to the Yotsuba Family's House which was not located on the map, and it was impossible for a motorbike to bring too many things.

However, that was never a problem from the beginning.

"As long as I contact them beforehand, I can request for a car to pick us up at the station. I have done so since last year, and I will be doing so this year as well."

Miyuki was the niece of the current Family Head, regardless of her position in being a next Family Head candidate. It was a given that she was treated as a VIP to the extent of picking her up from the station.

"Yuuka-san as well, didn't you do the same until last year?"

Car driving had reached the level of semi-auto drive. Even without the support of the transport system, the burden of driving was already much lesser than in the past.

Even so, the fatigue brought on by driving was not completely eliminated. It took only two hours to travel from Tokyo to the Main House, but it was much easier to take a ride to the nearest station and have people to pick them up from there. There was no need to specifically drive on her own.

"I don't mind that either. However, it's best if you don't do that." "Why is that so? There hasn't been any inconvenience until now."

"Until last time, that is. However, it's better to stop that for now. I can't say the reason though."

Can't say the reason, which meant that it was not only her ungrounded concern, but rather Yuuka had very clear grounds for her reasoning.

"Yuuka-san, is there something that you know?" "I can't say that."

"…Why, can't I do so even if it's the same as last year? What kind of merit will I get in going together with Yuuka-san?"

"I can't say that either."

Miyuki stared deeply at her, but Yuuka was warding it off with innocent eyes.

"…I see."

The one who broke the stance was Miyuki.

It wasn't due to her weakness. Miyuki simply did not have any means to make Yuuka talk.

Even if she used magic.

Yotsuba Magicians were categorized into two, those who specialized in Mental Interference Magic and those that possessed a unique, powerful magic. Miyuki specialized in an extremely powerful and unique Mental Interference Magic, hence, she possessed both traits. On the other hand, Yuuka was only a typical Mental Interference Magician.

Regardless of their capabilities in defeating an opponent, Yuuka was more versatile in techniques used to force others to confess secrets. At the very least, she was not using any violence on the surface but a way to extract information without force.

"Regarding your offer, I will answer you after consulting with my brother."

"Really? Then, I'm expecting a good answer from the both of you." Yuuka stood up from the sofa.

She said to Minami 'the tea was delicious' when the entrance was opened, and left with a rough greeting of 'see you' to Miyuki who was sending her out from the Shiba's home.

◊ ◊ ◊

"Yuuka-san... Such a thing."

When Tatsuya reached home, he heard of Yuuka's visit and offer from Miyuki and he stopped to think for a while. Of course, he was unable to

draw any conclusion from Yuuka's, no, the Tsukuba Family's intention only from that much exchange of words. However, after hearing Yuuka's offer and Mitsugu's unreasonable request, he couldn't help but think that these two occurrences were unmistakably related with one another.

"She did not try to give a vague reason, but told you that she 'can't' say it?"

"Yes. It seems like she was hiding something that she knew about."

In other words, something was going to happen. It was not only at the level of conjecture, but determined information. And that something was going to happen during the New Year's Gathering, no, along the way to the Main House from here.

There was a possibility that Yuuka's remarks were made in order to cause paranoia for Tatsuya and Miyuki, which would discourage them from going to the New Year's Gathering. However, when taking into consideration Mitsugu's intimidation (that there'd be attempts of attack against us) into account, the possibility seemed to elevate.

(Where will they attack? More importantly, who's the target? Miyuki? Or is it me?)

If it were Tatsuya, it would not be uncommon. Whenever he did any secret missions, he was always careful not to let others know about his identity. There shouldn't even be any witnesses. However, if he let someone slip away by mistake, and the organization where that person came from swore to take revenge regardless of the risk, it wouldn't be strange to have one or two enemies like that.

However, if it were a temporary retaliation of an illegal organization, he had no idea as to why they'd choose this kind of timing.

If they chose an out-of-sight place, the result would be the exact opposite for a magician opponent. Besides, the attack could let him turn the tables with 'self-defense' as an excuse, so this method had a high risk.

On the other hand, if the target were Miyuki, the mastermind could be narrowed down to nearly a single cause: the succession to be the Yotsuba Family Head. Tatsuya thought that it did not hold any worth to beat other families just to get the status of Family Head. If Miyuki wished to decline, Tatsuya wouldn't even mind. From his point of view, the other candidates seemed to be reluctant as well. The eager ones were the adults.

Still, there wasn't anything that would need drastic action to suit the adult's convenience. The route from the station to the Main House was also home ground for the Branch Families of the Yotsuba. It was a perfect venue for cover-ups or assault-and-feign-innocence.

If the target were Miyuki, it would be better to accept Yuuka's offer. There was a possibility that the assailant would retreat if they knew that Yuuka was with them, and he would be getting help from the Tsukuba Family if they were actually attacked.

On the contrary, if Tatsuya was the target, they would likely be forced into a disadvantage if Yuuka was with them. It would cause him to suffer more serious collateral damage if he was to accept Yuuka's proposal.

Nevertheless, they might be forced to make a certain concession if he were to accept Yuuka's proposal. Yuuka might be forced to do it by the assailant's instruction. Yet, the collateral damage received by Yuuka will remain to be a debt to both Tatsuya and Miyuki. In the end, the one who would gain the most would be Yuuka. Even if she felt no benefit with possessing the next Family Head position, it was a disadvantage for them to be indebted to another party who might become the next head.

"Let's reject it."

After thinking things through for a long while, Tatsuya stated his conclusion. Within his mind, a voice kept telling him that it was alright to accept Yuuka's offer. His intuition also whispered the same.

However, the benefits were too uncertain, and he judged that the disadvantages were greater if he were to accept Yuuka's offer.

"Understood. Then, I'll contact Yuuka-san."

She didn't use the telephone with the large display in the living room, so she probably intended to contact Yuuka from a smaller display terminal in her room. Miyuki bowed to her brother and went up to the second floor.

◊ ◊ ◊

"I'm sorry, even though you offered us…"

"I feel disappointed, but don't mind it. It was a sudden request after all."
"I'm really sorry."

"It's alright. However, if you encounter anything, don't hold back to contact me."

"Yes, thank you very much."

"Then, I'll wait for your further contact."

After putting back the video phone on the table, Yuuka laid her back on the large sofa in her living room. She even extended her feet in relaxation. It was a little disgraceful kind of conduct for a young lady, but she was currently living in the apartment alone. There were neither servants nor her mother to preach to her about manners here.

Before she reached 20, her mother and housekeepers alternately came, but all of them stopped coming as soon as she had turned 20. In Yuuka's consciousness, she was enjoying 20 years' worth of freedom for the past two years. Since her housemate who didn't really talk much was gone, she had the whole place as her private space. She was thinking that a free, unrestrained life was good.

While she was still relaxing, she mulled over Miyuki's response to her offer.

It was within her calculations that Miyuki would reject the offer. Rather, it would have been a surprise for Miyuki to accept her offer, given the limited information that Yuuka gave. There was a possibility that Miyuki thought that she would request the next Family Head position from Miyuki.

Anyways, Yuuka was not particularly interested in gaining the status of becoming the Yotsuba Family Head.

In the first place no matter how many candidates were selected, there was no meaning besides adjusting the appearance. Furthermore, if they were to comply with the Yotsuba's rules faithfully, Shiba Miyuki would be fully determined as the next Family Head. Currently, there was no better magician than Miyuki in the Yotsuba. Even when compared to the current Family Head, Maya, Miyuki was still better as a magician. At the very least, the Tsukuba Family knew this fact.

Yuuka, no, the Tsukuba Family, had decided two years ago that they would support Miyuki as the next Family Head. Since then, Yuuka was released from the monitoring and fuss, as it was assumed that she would not to be the next Family Head of the Yotsuba. Though, they didn't give up the candidacy in order to use it to maintain sway as with the other Branch Families.

"Moreover, Miyuki-san has that 'Onii-sama', too."

Yuuka knew what happened last year on the 31st of October at the Tsushima Base and the southern tip of Korean Peninsula. She also knew of what happened in Okinawa, back in August from four years ago.

“I’m not even sure I can win against Miyuki-san alone, much less when she has such a powerful human weapon as her ally.”

Yuuka had no drinking habit. This time, however, she thought that it would be better if she drank some.

She recalled the instance when she gave in to her mood and ended up having a hangover (fortunately the drugs developed for hangovers were able to immediately take effect), even before she brought the cup to her mouth.

“Even so… To have Tatsuya-san to serve her, that is just crazy. Even though there is no guarantee that he would keep quiet forever.”

Instead of a glass of wine, she poured out a bright red brewed rose hip tea to a glass tea cup, for the sake of their similar appearances, and drank the tea before her in one go.

“Shibata Oji-sama, Kuroba Oji-sama, and Shizuka Oji-sama, too, why do they have such enmity towards Tatsuya-san? I thought that Tatsuya- san is an important force for the Yotsuba though…”

She tilted the glass tea cup slightly, and Yuuka frowned a little. On top of the high temperature, the color emphasized that it was too darkly brewed.

“No, it’s not only the Oji-sama’s… Even the Main House’s staff also treat Tatsuya like a failure. The servants treat him so rudely, what the hell is the meaning behind all that?”

Yuuka took a sip of the rose hip tea. She was probably used to the sour taste, as she did not make a frown on her face this time.

"Okaa-sama also never told me why Tatsuya-san receives such treatment… I wonder if there is such a deep-rooted karma to this extent?"

Yuuka placed the tea cup with half of its contents on the table. She went to the bathroom right behind her, while a HAR manipulator came down from the ceiling to send the cup to the kitchen.

If Miyuki were to be the next Family Head in this upcoming New Year's Gathering, the reason behind Tatsuya's unnatural diminishing treatment might also be revealed. Yuuka thought so, voicelessly.

◊ ◊ ◊

After her call with Yuuka, Miyuki made a call to the Main House, asking to be picked up at the station on the 29th of December. Actually, if she was ordered to attend the New Year's Gathering, as long as she could arrive by the 31st, everything would be alright even if she took into account the time needed for preparation. The main reason why she asked to be picked up on the 29th was unmistakably due to taking into account the possibility of any disturbances that could occur.

The one who received the call was the butler, Obara, a former traffic riot police, who was the person in-charge of transportation arrangements.

After the call with Obara, it was decided that they would be picked up at the station at 1 P.M. This plan was to be kept confidential otherwise.

When Miyuki arrived safely, the information would be communicated to all of the employees working in the Main House.

◊ ◊ ◊

Shibata Katsushige had just joined the Ministry of Defense this year as an Office Worker. Although there was no forced attendance, and the general public holidays were regularly available, there was no lengthy winter break like he was used to having as a student. Today, he had just gotten back from his newcomer job——also referred to as miscellaneous——to his apartment.

As if waiting for this timing, his phone rang and the screen displayed an incoming call.

“Katsushige-san, let me.” “No, it’s fine.”

Kotona welcomed him home at the entrance but she was restrained and ordered to return to the living room so Katsushige operated the wall-attached type terminal.

“Tou-san… is there something?”

The person who appeared on the display was his father whom he had just met with three days ago, the Head of the Shibata Family, one of Yotsuba Family’s Branch Families.

“Katsushige, you’ve reached home?” “Yes, I’ve just arrived.”

“I see. Well, please take a seat.”

He said so from the other side of the screen.

Katsushige judged that the conversation would be long, so he sat down on the sofa facing the display.

With a height of 188 cm and a weight of 80 kg, Katsushige boasted his physique by making the commercial sofa set look a little narrow.

However, Katsushige seemed to have become accustomed to it and so, his long legs passed calmly between the sofa and reception table.

“Katsushige, how’s your work?”

"I'm still receiving the same kind of task as before… as it's only been three days since I started work."

"Hmm… I see."

Katsushige's father had a militarian temperament, so it was kind of unusual to see him stammer this way. It must have been a really tough topic to start.

"Tou-san, do you want to talk about the upcoming New Year's Gathering?"

Hence, Katsushige decided to ask the topic on his own. It had only been three days since their last meeting, so there was no need to purposely video call like this. However, during their last meeting, this business had failed to come out.

"Yes, actually, Shiba Miyuki contacted Obara a little while ago. It seems like she'll be coming to the Main House on the 29th."

"I see, so Miyuki-san will come on 29th, as well."

The non-existence of New Year's Holiday in the modern central government was not limited to the Ministry of Defense. A number of staff are packed into the government office in preparation for any unforeseen circumstances. Especially since the Ministry of Defense must be run year round to prevent any outbreak of a World War. However, to novices like Katsushige, they were given days off starting from the 29th.

"However, is there any problem with that?"

Katsushige asked curiously while thinking of a girl's face who was younger and beautiful. The upcoming New Year's Gathering would see to have all the next Family Head candidates to attend, hence, it was not out of the ordinary that Miyuki would come as well. Katsushige had

failed to understand that his father purposely called him out of nowhere for the convenience of Miyuki.

"Katsushige." "Yes?"

After his father called his name in such a formal way, he was getting more and more suspicious. However, the next words had blown off all such trivial questions.

“We must not let Miyuki attend the New Year’s Gathering.”

Katsushige was instantly speechless. Not that he had lost his words, but there were questions springing on his mind all at once, and he was confused on which one to ask first.

“Do you mind if I ask about the reason?”

In the end, he eventually chose this mediocre question with a general sense of versatility.

“During the upcoming New Year’s Gathering, Maya-san is going to announce Miyuki as the next Head.”

“I see. That’s disappointing.”

Even though Katsushige answered so, he was actually not so surprised himself.

Miyuki was certainly an excellent magician and she also possessed a high aptitude of for Mental Interference Magic, a trait of the Yotsuba Family. Katsushige also knew that Miyuki was the most promising candidate for the next Family Head.

While the aptitude in having Mental Interference magic was an important quality for the Yotsuba Family Head, it was not an absolute condition. Up to the previous head, Eisaku, he was highly versatile in Mental Interference Magic, but Miya who had the powerful ‘Mental

Design Interference’ had not selected to be the Head but instead, Maya was chosen. Moreover, Katsushige thought that he was superior to Miyuki in terms of combat power.

His chance to be chosen as the next Family Head was by no means small, such was Katsushige's thought. Even so, the fact that he didn't receive much of a shock even though he was not chosen meant…

(Actually, I, myself, knew that Miyuki is the best magician in the Yotsuba.)

"Tou-san, are you perhaps still bothered for me? It's alright. I'm already an adult, so I can at least give her my blessing well."

Katsushige formed a smile, and it didn't take much effort for him to do so.

"It's not like that."

However, his father's strong refusal hinted at something along the lines of 'Maya-san would appoint Miyuki to be the next Head. However, I won't let it happen'.

"Tou-san… you don't plan to revolt against Toushu-sama, do you?" Katsushige accused him with a strong tone.

"Even though the Branch Families' Heads have come together to support a single candidate, if we measure the influence of the Main Family's Head's decision over ours, in the end, the issue will be settled

by the Main Family's Head. Even if the Branch Families' Heads support me to be the next Family Head, it would be unthinkable to be able to get the support of the whole family. Tou-san, you should be very clear on this matter as well."

Contrary to Katsushige's expectation, Osamu was nodding on screen.

"I understand. I don't have any intention to oppose Miyuki in becoming the next Family Head in the first place. Although I do think that you're more suitable to be the Head."

"What do you mean?"

“There’s no avoiding in Miyuki becoming the next Family Head. However, it’s still too early.”

“I don’t think that Maya-sama will immediately retire as soon as she names Miyuki as the next Family Head, though.”

“I said, the appointment of Miyuki as the next Family Head is still too early.”

“I understand that she's bound to have some immaturity, as she’s only 16 years old now, but…”

Katsushige failed to understand the mind of his father. He could understand that she was still too young to inherit the title of Family Head. However, he wondered if there would be any inconvenience if she was to be named as a successor.

“There isn’t any problem with Miyuki herself. That child is suitable to become the next Head of the Yotsuba.”

Katsushige was getting more confused with how the conversation was going.

“Then, where does the problem lie?” “The problem is Miyuki’s Guardian.”

“Tatsuya-kun, right? Certainly, he has some problems as a magician, but I have no doubt in his ability as a combat magician. He also contributes to the Yotsuba’s finances as Taurus Silver, and he’s a Strategic-Class Magician who is to be the trump card of Japan. Compared to his ‘Material Burst’, Itsuwa Mio-san’s ‘Abyss’ only has limited applications for battles unless on the surface of water.

“That Material Burst itself is the problem. The power of that magic is too enormous. You should know better than me regarding how it initiated the backdoor discussion in the Military after it was deployed on the southern tip of the Korean Peninsula since you’re in the Ministry of Defense.”

“Certainly, there was such a case, but at the same time, we were able to bring about the conclusion for an Underwater Decurity Treaty with other countries. The New Soviet Union has also been sounding their alliance with Japan recently. Although there is a downside in the growing tensions with the USNA, the end result is still considered a positive gain in keeping the status quo against neighboring countries.

“If his value as a political tool grows, then it is even more of a necessary to cut him off from the central figures of the Yotsuba so that he won’t get caught up in any political agenda. We need a little more time for that purpose. If we nominate Miyuki as the next Family Head now, it is inevitable for that man to become the next Family Head’s close aide.

That will surely bring about all sorts of problems for the Yotsuba in the future.”

What Osamu said at a glance was logical. However, Katsushige couldn’t help but feel that there is an underlying feeling arming those words.

“Tou-san… why do you, no, why do all the Branch Family Heads dislike Tatsuya-kun so much?”

Any facial expression Osamu may have had disappeared from his face. It could have been due to his effort to hide his upsetness. However, that expressionless mask of his was not able to trick Katsushige, as he had acquired much wisdom over the many years that they had spent together.

“Such an enormous power will compromise the stability of the world. What we want is a power that protects us from harm. We do not with for such a power to shake the world.”

“However, that’s not Tatsuya-kun’s responsibility, right?”

“I don’t plan to make him take on the responsibility. It is our responsibility to seal his magic.”

Katsushige realized that any further persuasion was meaningless. “What do you want me to do?”

He decided to avoid any more meaningless conversations and set his mind on what do now.

“Mashiba and Shizuka are already on the move.” “Is Kuroba-dono not going to make a move?”

Katsushige's question was brought up due to the unexpected situation. The Mashiba Family and the Shizuka Family were not espionage professionals. They had similar abilities as other Ten Master Clans, but the experts of espionage in the Yotsuba Family was led by the Kuroba Family. It seemed unnatural for the Kuroba Family to not be involved in this kind of work that requires a certain level of subtlety.

“The Kuroba Family also agrees with the idea of Shiba Tatsuya’s exclusion. It’s just that Kuroba-dono’s children strongly favor him, so he refrains himself from making a move.”

“I see... So, what do I need to do specifically?”

After explaining that the Branch Heads had such unity, it seemed that they wanted to maneuver the Branches’ force in the most effective way for the execution stage. It was nothing but insecurity of the future, and Katsushige decided that his role was to keep the fatalities to a minimum. For that very reason, he needed to know their plans.

“There’s no need to injure Miyuki. The end purpose is to halt her movements. As long as she doesn’t get to the Main House on New Year’s Day, it will be enough.”

It was a more peaceful approach than he thought, and Katsushige was a little relieved.

“Your turn is on the 31st. You’re the last chance we have in case Mashiba-dono and Shizuka-dono fail.”

"Please tell me the details. If you know, please include the plans of Mashiba-dono and Shizuka-dono."

Answering Katsushige's question, his father spoke of the details of the conspiracy.

◊ ◊ ◊

December 27th, Thursday night.

Lieutenant Yaguchi of the JSDF's Matsumoto Base threw himself in bed due to exhaustion from training.

An officer shall become a role model even for personal grooming, was the statement from his precocious Officer Trainer, but Yaguchi had no will to do anything else.

He had been in a lethargic state since summer, ever since his respected superior was ousted due to an incident.

Before that incident, Lieutenant Yaguchi belonged to the faction of 'hardliners against the coalition with the Great Asian Alliance. It was a faction under Colonel Sakai and had a lengthy population of incorruptible Patriots who openly complained persistently to the top-tiers about the threat of the Great Asian Alliance and the risk of compromising with other countries regardless of the hostilities they received in return. Even after 'Scorched Halloween', when they had a golden opportunity for an early ceasefire, Colonel Sakai and his confidants didn't cease their claims.

Then, when more people in the JSDF came to terms with that ideology, that event happened.

A suspicion of creating new weapons using civilians, High School Students, and minors as targets for a test.

However, it was a plan created by the Kudou Family all along. The incident itself could only be seen as a scheme to trash Colonel Sakai and the executives of the 'hardliners against the Great Asian Alliance', that landed them in military prison. The maximum sentence was five years, but they wouldn't be able to return to military service afterwards. It was questionable if they could even come out of the prison alive. In fact, the executives had died in unnatural deaths before the imprisonment.

Lieutenant Yaguchi was left alone since he was young and low-ranked. He was also helped by the fact that he was not at the scene when the matter occurred. He was relocated to the Matsumoto regiment as a test pilot for one of the Powered Suits for the Special Mechanized Infantry Test Unit for actual battle deployment. He was not demoted; it was part of official training to study general military service, yet he had lost his motivation, and saw it as a creed to leave the capital.

Nevertheless, he didn't sit idly and had participated in the training as an exemplary soldier. He was convinced that by doing his best, he would not put to shame his hardliner executives who were falsely accused.

Yaguchi was tired. From a third party point of view, he was doing an impossible thing. He kept on moving his body even after his motivation had plummeted. More than his body, his spirit was exhausted. He harbored his ear to a dubious whisper, that must be the case.

"Who's that!?"

He felt a sign of life in the room beside his that was not supposed to be there and got up from his bed quickly. No matter how fatigued he was, the movement was imprinted into him by the training regardless of his choice.

"The one who took down Colonel Sakai and the 'Great Asian Alliance hardliner's was the Yotsuba Family of the Ten Master Clans."

A strangely withered voice was emitted from the corner of the room. It was a voice that sounded like the grazing of cold winter woods.

“Is that true? In the first place, who are you? Is there any basis for your claim?”

“I can’t show you the evidence, but it’s a fact.”

Yaguchi’s suspicion was a natural reaction as a man who previously served as a military personnel, but it was probably the same for anyone, too.

“However, why did the Ten Master Clans, especially the Yotsuba to boot...”

However, what the voice told him could not be dismissed by Lieutenant Yaguchi.

“The mastermind who instructed the blaming on Colonel Sakai, the Yotsuba, is not yet satisfied.”

Once he tried to see carefully, he could see a silhouette of a man in the darkness in the corner of his room.

The cold wintry wind voice came from that shadow.

“Mastermind? Who is it!? Who was the one who trashed the Colonel!?”

While reducing his volume as not to be heard by his neighbor, Lieutenant Yaguchi questioned in a strong tone.

However, there was no answer.

“They are going to assassinate the hardliner executives, including the imprisoned Colonel Sakai in the military prison.”

The shadow seemed to say only what it wanted to tell.

It probably came from a recorded message, that was Yaguchi’s first thought, but he soon realized that he was mistaken.

“Don’t be stupid. The military prison is tightly shut out from the outside world. Even its security level has outdone the Prime Minister’s Official Residence. There couldn’t be any such intrusion.”

“It’s possible for the Yotsuba to do it.”

The shadow refuted Yaguchi’s instant argument with a short statement.

“Whether it’s the patrol soldiers, military prison walls, or the security system, all of them cannot go against the Yotsuba. In order to prevent the assassination, other means aside from power are necessary”

Before Yaguchi was able to react for the shadow’s words, the shadow continued his message, the ’29th of December, 1 P.M.’.

“An important person from the Yotsuba with a small number of escorts will go down to Kobuchizawa Station. They will wait for a car from the Yotsuba to pick them up at a nearby hot spring.”

“…What in the world?”

“That important person is a young girl.”

It was probably an answer to Yaguchi’s question or the shadow just said the things he prepared in advance. There was no distinction at all.

“The Yotsuba Family would never abandon that girl. If you take her hostage, it’s possible to release Colonel Sakai.”

“Such a thing…”

Can’t be done, was what Yaguchi was about to say. Even if the Colonel was falsely accused, he was imprisoned in response to a formal conviction of a military court. Even the Yotsuba couldn’t possibly interfere with that. No, it was simply unthinkable.

“They can do it.”

However, Yaguchi couldn’t say ‘cannot’ from his mouth. Although he didn’t say ‘possible’, he ended up hearing those words.

"However, even if you said to take her as a hostage, how…"

He was already riding on the offer of the unidentified shadow. In that instance, Yaguchi chose to stain his hands in illegal means in the hopes of rescuing the Colonel and the other executives.

"I have no such means!"

"There is a detention facility for Reinforced Psychics here on the Matsumoto Base."

"What!? Do you plan for them to…"

During the 20 year long Global War, in order to create a quick force, as part of the Magician Development Research, Reinforced Psychics were subjected to strengthening processes to squeeze out their specific ability for battle. They were the black ops of the JSDF who were detained at the JSDF Facilities based on the threat of their power after the war. Nearby the Matsumoto Base, there was a single facility for a relatively low threat level group, and Reinforced Psychic Body Treatment was accommodated there.

"Reinforced Psychics have a grudge-like jealousy against the Ten Master Clans. It would be easy to use them as a pawn to fight against the Yotsuba Family.

Yaguchi shook his head upon hearing the shadow's proposal.

"No, it's impossible. I don't even have the authority to go into the laboratory."

"We will provide the means. Although, we can't prepare for a regular life."

"Are you turning me into a criminal?"

Yaguchi blurred his voice in anguish. However, he didn't reject immediately to the illegal proposal, he had already decided which road he would choose.

“Colonel Sakai was also charged through illegal means. If you can ensure the target, it’s possible to out-win their measures.”

In other words, he could not only save Colonel Sakai, but also escape the criminal brand himself.

“You’re only correcting the justice that has been twisted. It’s not evil even if you’re engaging in a criminal act”

“I got it. What should I do?”

Yaguchi felt that even without eyes and a nose, the shadow was forming a grin and laughing from its mouth.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was around the same time that Lieutenant Yaguchi from the Matsumoto Base formed his decision to disobey the military law.

The same shadow emerged in the Second Supply Uji Base. The shadow showed himself to Captain Hatae, the Great Asian Alliance reconciliation faction leader.

Hatae was accused of having invited the enemy’s foreign magicians into the base at the end of October, but the charge was made more lenient after it was detected that his consciousness was under the influence of Mental Interference Magic. He was sentenced to 6 months of salary cut for deploying a military vehicle to a battle without the instruction of the Base Commander. Although it was tough economically, it was also quite

a compassionate measure that he was not demoted, and even Hatae himself thought so.

Nevertheless, the punishment didn't make him change his stance. He kept wishing for a truce with the Great Asian Alliance to repair the current hostility between the two countries, Hatae even received advice from his superiors and colleagues that he would only worsen his standing within the JSDF's in the country. Yet, he persisted in his view.

He didn't hesitate in his belief, but he felt that his position was getting worse by the day. At this rate, in the near future, his superiors would get impatient and think that they were keeping a useless person on their payroll.

The shadow appeared to him at such a time. "Illusion projection?"

Hatae was familiar with Lieutenant Yaguchi's magic from the Matsumoto Base. This was the reason that the shadow materialized itself at a glance.

"Where did you come from?"

However, he knew that it was an illusion, so he wouldn't know the identity of the magician. Nevertheless, it didn't make much difference for Hatae.

"The other day, the one who attacked the Base was the Ten Master Clans-Yotsuba Family."

The shadow didn't answer Hatae's question. "I know that well enough."

Hatae didn't mind the matter-of-fact statement. If it had planned to reveal its identity, the magician wouldn't send a shadow without eyes, a nose and a mouth.

Moreover, Hatae had guessed that the attack came from the Yotsuba Family of the Ten Master Clans. The intruder was clearly using Modern Magic. He had no other idea of any other Modern Magicians who would be bold enough to intrude on a JSDF Base.

“The Yotsuba are continuing to hunt the people who communicate with the Great Asian Alliance even now.”

However, the next line that came from the shadow couldn’t be ignored.

“Those bastards still hunt down my comrades? Damn it, those freaking hounds!”

“Pretty much so. Captain Hatae, you’d also be targeted again by the Yotsuba in the future.”

Hatae visibly showed how upset he was. However, he put up a defiant attitude soon after.

“Despite being manipulated, you have attempted to insurrect a Civil War. Moreover, you’re already prepared.”

“There wouldn’t be any honor in your final moments. As a traitor of one’s own country, only a disgraceful death is waiting you.”

“Ugh…”

“Despite being a JSDF Officer, you were used by the enemy conveniently, which makes you a traitor. Your parents and siblings must be ashamed of you.”

“Then!”

“It’s the same even with your self-determination. If you were to run away by taking your own life in desperation for your betrayal, had you done so right after the incident, they probably would have accepted your atonement for your offense through your death, and it would have placed you as a soldier who knew of shame. However, it’s too late. You have missed the opportunity to do so.”

“Then, what should I do!?”

Hatae’s face was filled with a desperate expression.

He was condemned by a shadow, and had lost his usual rationality.

"You survive. As long as you do, you have the opportunity to change the stigma."

"But, how!?"

The shadow grinned. It was not a laughing face, but for the opponent, it was no less than a laugh.

"December 30th, three days from now, the magician who attacked the Base will be at Kobuchizawa Station, waiting for contact from the Yotsuba's Main House."

"What?"

"The purpose of the contact is for supply and transmission of new missions. The mission is to annihilate the Great Asian Alliance's Reconciliation Faction."

"What… do you want me to do?"

Hatae asked while clenching his teeth. At this stage, he already guessed the intention of the shadow.

"You want me to assassinate that magician?"

"This is only the first step. If you want to survive, you have to fight. If you don't, you will end up being defeated."

"You want to turn me into an assassin!?" "Captain Hatae, I leave it to your decision."

Hatae was not able to answer in the form of words anymore. His voice was obstructed when he was clenching his teeth.

"Fortunately, I can say, you found a reliable colleague this time, not some Ancient Magician. I'm sure, he'd gladly lend you his power."

Without waiting for Hatae's response, the shadow disappeared. Unlike Kasei-tai, there was neither residue nor any trace of it ever existing.

Chapter 3

Saturday, December 29th. It was the day Tatsuya and the others, no it was the day Miyuki departs for the Home of the Head Family.

Tatsuya, Miyuki and Minami took their lunch a bit early and left the house before noon.

The village where the Home of the Yotsuba Family was does not have a designated address, so unfortunately they could not use any home delivery services. So even though their luggage had ended up increasing, the distance they would walk was not that much of a burden since it was essentially just as far as the distance of getting on and off at the Station from the Cabinet. Originally, they needed only to carry along their clothes and their personal essentials, so it was not supposed to be heavy. It was just bulky. Besides, the furisode that Miyuki will be wearing, it has always been prepared for her every year at the Home of the Head Family.

It took them short of a single hour from her house to reach the Kobuchizawa Station where they agreed to meet. With no problems along the way, the three reached the appointed station within schedule.

Tatsuya had not forgotten about Kuroba Mitsugu's request, which might as well have been a warning of an attack. However, he thought there would be no possibility of a terrorist attack happening at a Public Transport Facility. Taking on the government head-on was not the way the Yotsuba deals with its enemies. Should there be an attack, it should have happened by now, Tatsuya expected.

The car that was picking them up had already arrived. The driver was also vaguely familiar to him. He showed a smile and exchanged words with Minami as if the two had been acquainted in some way when she

worked at the family home until last year. Though his eyes turned toward Tatsuya; his gaze was always that of seeing something that wasn’t human.

After having finished loading his suitcase into the trunk, Tatsuya led Miyuki in. After all, the driver’s stare that once befell Tatsuya turned troubled when it centered on Miyuki. Tatsuya was avoiding any unnecessary trouble, so parts of him wished the driver who came to meet Miyuki at least remembered to better play his part, but the driver is someone employed under the Butler, Obara, who prioritizes strength and courage above that of courtesy. The required skills include not only the ability to drive, but also the strength to fight when necessary, so it couldn't be helped even though he was a little incompetent.

There was another reason for why he hurried Miyuki into the car. As he expected, he felt inquisitive eyes. Rather than saying that someone had been on the lookout for Tatsuya and the others, it felt more like someone had been on the lookout for this car.

If we assumed that there was a traitor or a conspirator in the Branch Families of the Yotsuba, it should not be difficult for them to know that this car had come from the Main House to meet Miyuki. Tatsuya had the feigning suspicion that they would seriously go that far, but reality would not change however he thought of it.

Except, there were less eyes on the lookout for them than he thought. Tatsuya was concerned about that. He had the impression that their destination was known and that they were going to get ambushed. It was bound to happen, that information of Miyuki's departure had been leaked.

The use of magic other than for self-defense purposes is against the law. He couldn't make use of magic to do away with them for the reason that they would be seen; it would end up the same even if he didn't use magic, either. Immediately starting the car was the only applicable choice in this situation.

Minami sat in the front passenger seat. It was easier to keep an eye out on the surroundings from the front seat. But Minami hurriedly marched into the front passenger seat and was modestly yet stubbornly demanding, so he could not help but surrender the seat. Left with no choice, Tatsuya observed the surroundings from the back seat.

They got on the move immediately after leaving town and staying clear of private citizens.

The suspicious vehicle was caught in the police dragnet for Tatsuya.
"Onii-sama, what…"

"It's an attack!"

Saying that Miyuki would notice the changes in Tatsuya earlier than her older brother could give a warning may be an understatement; if that should ever be the case, it is in reaction to the delay of the moment.

Even now, a slight time lag was being created as Miyuki's words were interrupted.

"Grenade shots: two in the front, two in the back."

In response to Tatsuya's voice, Minami tried to discharge a physical, heat-resistant barrier magic.

However, what she released was a disorganized, half-complete Magic Sequence that was affected by the interference of 21 other people present in the area.

The target was the automobile Tatsuya and the others were riding in. Minami's barrier magic was obstructed due to the Magic Sequences that the 21 people were producing, as if almost deliberately being subjected in a conflicting state——a state akin to being under the effects of Cast Jamming——which obstructs the invocation of magic due to chaotically overlapping Magic Sequences mutually interfering with each other. No, 'almost deliberately' aren't the right words. Looking at how each of the

21 Magic Sequences were being adjusted at the same outputs, one might say the conflicting state was being produced deliberately.

It wasn't a coincidence, at least Tatsuya thought so. This isn't a collaboration made possible by training overnight.

This was a way of using magical abilities in order for them to be able to use magic. That is, it is a technique for magicians who cannot use magic at all, a strengthened experimental magical combat technique for subjects who failed to become magicians.

"Minami, stop using magic." "Huh? Okay!"

Without waiting for Minami's reply, Tatsuya pointed diagonally upwards with his right hand. On his chest was a complete Thought-Operated Type CAD, on his wrist was a 'Silver Torus', a Mind Control–Compatible, Torus-Shaped, Specialized CAD.

It disintegrated grenade shells midair as the shells lost their trajectory and their parts scattered on the road.

It also delivered the same fate to the high-explosive projectiles lobbed at them at the sound of two or three explosions, one after another.

The car that Tatsuya and the others were riding in slipped away at the sidelines of the small-scale explosions.

The fuses of the high-explosive projectiles set off as they fell from the sky. Fortunately, the explosives themselves from where the fuses separated did not explode.

Tatsuya waved and flailed his left hand as if driving away an insect overhead.

The magic he invoked was Gram Dispersion.

The form of magic which was fixed in a state of conflict midway in its operation was blown about in an instant.

“Go back to town!”

Tatsuya took the role of guarding their convoy, and without paying heed to Minami who was depressed in the front passenger seat, he ordered the driver to take a U-turn.

However, the driver simply laid his eyes on the car chasing them reflected on the rear mirror, from whose window a grenade launcher jutted out, and made neither an indication of stepping on the break nor an indication of turning the steering wheel.

Not following Tatsuya’s words, he was in the position to bulldoze his way through.

“Please turn the car back to town!” Miyuki repeated her older brother’s order. “Understood!”

The driver immediately followed Miyuki’s command. “Minami, Miyuki, I am at your mercy.”

Tatsuya told Minami as he took out a pair of heat-resistant, bulletproof military-grade sunglasses from his pocket.

“O-okay!”

With Tatsuya’s expression hidden by the well-fitted sunglasses on his face, he voiced to Miyuki.

“Miyuki, let’s rendezvous at the front of the station.” “Onii-sama!?”

The driver made a spin turn at the same time that Tatsuya opened the window.

The four-wheeled cars of this era cannot make side turns due to their structure as their anti-lock brakes are intensively constructed. However, they are equipped with four-wheel steering that has a high degree of freedom, so expert drivers can make turns in small turning radius by spinning at that location. Currently, this is called a spin turn, not a side turn.

The moment the car turned, Tatsuya flew out of the rear passenger seat window due to the centrifugal force. Landing through the use of a combination of jumping and his inertia control ability, Tatsuya disassembled the gun in the hands of the closest attacker, preventing further attacks on the car.

Turning back, he removed the wheels from the self-propelled vehicle pursuing the car with Miyuki inside that was in mid-turn. There was a short sound of the car's body grinding on the road surface.

After checking that the car with Miyuki inside was going to town, Tatsuya leaped towards the closest attacker.

Such a counterattack shouldn't usually be expected. However, the opponent's reaction was fast. He wasn't even hindered by his gun's disassembly. Facing the unarmed Tatsuya, the man, dressed in working clothes of a certain delivery agency, pulled a fighting combat knife from behind his back. It was a knife with a wide guard for protecting fingers, resembling brass knuckles but with a blade.

(A Reinforced Soldier of the National Defense Army? No, an Artificial Psychic!?)

It was equipment for hand-to-hand combat without relying on firearms. There was no way that a regular soldier or a band member of a gang would have such a thing. That, and the magic that created the recent conflict, meant that this combatant could be nothing but a failure of Magician Development. It was surely an Artificial Psychic that couldn't become a Magician.

A knife struck out. The special stainless steel blade of the knife was clearly charged with electricity. Even before having guessed that his opponent was a Psychic, Tatsuya was using both his physical and spiritual 'eyes'. With this knife, even if you were to dodge the blade, you would be hurt by sparks or electrical discharge from the energy stored

within. The energy level there is different from non-lethal weapons like stun guns because it is lethal.

Tatsuya wasn't just barely dodging the blade, he was retreating with big steps.

Sparks were flying from the edge of the knife. Electricity then ran from the knife and into the man's arm.

He must have been wearing protective clothing just in case. It didn’t look like he got an electrical shock. But he was shocked by another thing.

He stopped for a second, realizing that his abilities were used without his will, and that his superpowers betrayed him. And in that time, Tatsuya hit him with his palms. He reaped the consciousness out of the man by hitting him with a vibration wave, his next best magic after his unique ability.

The trick behind the man's knife's discharging by itself was simple. When jumping behind, Tatsuya used a narrowly refined spell dismantling and blew away the magic containing the charge. The thing is, Modern Magic originates from the study of Psychic Abilities. It was common sense for Tatsuya that Psychic Abilities and Magic were the same thing.

When the man fell, the baseball-like working hat that he wore very low, maybe to hide his looks, fell off. The man looked like he was around 15 years old.

But Tatsuya didn’t have the time to closely look at the man's face The enemies were coming at high speed from both sides. They were wearing the same delivery working clothes and baseball caps as the man lying here. There was no need to think about it, they had to have been his allies.

Their speed was comparable to the fastest magician Tatsuya knew, Erika.

However, their control was sloppy. Two Psychics attacked at slightly different times. Tatsuya stepped to the right, in the direction of the man that would have hit him first.

It was not to counter. Only to dodge. The man's legs were still moving when Tatsuya stopped behind him.

The Psychic attacking from the left dodged the Psychic coming from the right.

Tatsuya was readily waiting for the man on the left. A knife was drawn.

A face was hit with a palm.

Vibration waves were released from Tatsuya's palm, dodging the knife and circling from behind, and shook the Psychic's Mind.

(Did I kill him?)

For a second, Tatsuya doubted for a deeper than he expected response, but, seeing that the man slipping on the road surface was still releasing life force, he turned to the man and guided his attention there.

Acceleration Magic was working on the man's body. There was no visible carrier responsible for inertial control there. The G force on his body should have been well above the body's limit, but the man managed to sustain his balance.

(So the body is also enhanced. Then it's decided.)

So the opponent really is both body-reinforced and an Artificial Psychic. So it's a Reinforced Soldier with Magical Abilities. They were developed in the first half of the repeated 20 years of World Wars, but were never completed. Germany tried to achieve this goal with genetic manipulation, but Japan used drug reinforcement.

The reason for scrapping the plan and concluding that the development project for a Reinforced Army of Artificial Psychic was a failure lies in the fact that their ability range was only 30 cm. In other words, they

could only use weapons that were within a 30 cm radius from their body. They couldn't sustain the magic required for event transformation at longer distances. They could only project Idea Information, but it had no effect on events.

(So it wasn't entirely pointless? It's impressive to combine imperfect magic to interfere with the workings of magic. There are smart people anywhere you look.)

Setting those thoughts aside, if they are the experimental Reinforced Artificial Psychics, they should be more than 60 years old. It may not be fully proven, but the ability to preserve youth must have been a side effect of their strengthening.

If put into words, this was the amount of information that passed through in Tatsuya's brain, but in reality it took only a single second. And in the meantime, Tatsuya's body moved to counterattack the man that moved with the speed of a cannonball due to Acceleration Magic.

The opponent's movements might amaze you, but it was only due to the sheer speed. The movements themselves weren't polished at all. To Tatsuya's eyes, they were sloppy. Maybe it was because he was comparing them to Yakumo and Yanagi, but the fact that even on a more general level, "the techniques were weak" was the objective truth.

They weren't lacking in training. Artificial Psychics only accelerated their movement through speed, but they lacked the mental ability to follow it. They were unable to follow their magically accelerated speed.

To Tatsuya's knowledge, the fastest magician was Erika, but if it was only about moving fast, then there should be countless magicians with even faster movements. Both Yanagi and Kazama should be capable of it. Measuring by magical ability, even Miyuki, Mayumi and Katsuto should be able to do it. Tatsuya thought that it should be possible even for Ichijou Masaki. But, they don't use that level of self-acceleration in a

real fight, not because there was no need to, but because they were unable to control their accelerated bodies.

Only Erika with her natural talent was able to precisely control her body and ability without losing balance with that speed. You couldn't catch up to her with fake skills. It was possible to deal with them because they were imitations.

And that was how.

Tatsuya slightly opened the palms of his hands in preparation.

Knocking the knife aside, the Artificial Psychic's wrist slid into Tatsuya's palm.

It looked like he himself went on to be caught, just like that time when Yanagi fought No Head Dragon's Generator during the Nine Schools Competition.

Tatsuya made his weight and inertia disappear, and, forcibly straightening his opponent's hands, flew.

He lost his weight and inertia in just that single moment.

The man’s body was pulled down as the weight suddenly burdened his outstretched arm.

Tatsuya’s feet straddled the man’s arm.

He feigned a jumping perpendicular armbar and sent a kick to his head.

Losing his consciousness, the man was slammed against the road, while Tatsuya regained his posture mid-air and headed for his next prey upon landing.

There were 28 remaining enemies that he caught with his superior senses. Among them, 9 were Artificial Psychics. There should have been another one, aside from the 11 Psychics who generated the disruption field deliberately, who more likely than not had been showing restraint inside the car that was tracking them. The 19 normal people (meaning

those who were neither Psychics nor men who possessed super abilities) had already fled.

However, Tatsuya did not intend to have a single one of them escape without harm.

Unfortunately, the police arrived, so Tatsuya left that place just as he had defeated 20 of them.

He eventually ran past the street by the station while carefully slipping through from the sight of the police before joining up with Miyuki and the others.

It was already 4 P.M.

“Onii-sama, welcome back!”

Having drunk her tea in the waiting room of the station, Miyuki jumped out right from there when she laid her eyes upon the silhouette of Tatsuya.

“I’m sorry, I kept you waiting.”

Tatsuya caressed Miyuki’s head she stands still, on the verge of hugging him and goes together with Miyuki into the waiting room where Minami had been left behind.

“Thank you for your hard work, too, Minami.” “No, your safety is more important than anything.”

Signaling Minami with his hand to sit before she stood up in refusal, Tatsuya also sat on the opposite side of her.

Miyuki was, needless to say, beside Tatsuya. Then, beside Minami were the trio’s luggage.

“What happened to the car that was supposed to meet us?”

“It went back. The pattern of the attack was without a doubt being recorded by traffic cameras, so I explicitly told him not to return to the Main House directly… Umm, would it have been better if we had kept him here?”

Laying his hand on his sister’s cheek as she looked up at his own face apprehensively, Tatsuya laughed as if to calm her.

“No, your judgment was right, if you think of about it hard enough, Miyuki.”

“Thank you very much…”

Miyuki gazed downward, blushing, as he looked at her with his teasing eyes asking, “What now?”

But Minami’s face quickly changed into a reserved expression the moment Tatsuya’s eyes moved.

Miyuki’s color of being shocked by Tatsuya’s eyes looking at her was probably because she failed to notice the moment of that change.

Minami endured the uncomfortable pain as much as she could.

Tatsuya fortunate as he was did not have any twisted pretense that he was enjoying fixing his eyes on Minami like that to see how far he could fool her.

Tatsuya immediately turned his eyes back to Miyuki and removed his hand which had been lying on her cheek.

“Ah…”

Ignoring Miyuki’s seemingly sorrowful voice, Tatsuya ordered his younger sister to contact the Main House.

“We will temporarily return home today. We will head out again tomorrow, so make a request for that dispatch.”

Originally, arriving at the Main House on New Year's Eve was no problem. What happened today was an accident. No, it was because he took into account the possibility that they would be stranded due to sabotage.

Unfortunately, his concerns hit the mark, but that was precisely why there was no need to overdo it today.

"Understood."

Miyuki immediately took her mobile information terminal out and opened the communication line to the Main House.

The person who came to answer the phone was the Butler Obara. Obara asked about Miyuki's safety many, many times, apologizing for the mishap even more, and repeatedly insisted on sending a car to pick them up afterwards.

"…Obara-san, I would like to go back to my house for a while."

Miyuki got angry without warning. No, it was not as if she raised her voiced so much that we would say she got angry. Rather, that cool voice of hers made it clear that it was a no, even to the listener who had no room for changing his mind.

"O-okay, it is acknowledged."

Obara stood at attention beside the voice receiver——at least, his voice resounded as if he made that posture.

Miyuki saw her chance and decided to press him for answers.

"Please relay to Oba-sama that I will report once again on today's matters after returning home."

"O-okay, as you wish."

"And then, I would like to request for a car to pick us up tomorrow as well."

“O-okay, certainly, anytime as you well please.”

Obara has always stood out for his exaggerated manners, but she hasn’t quite remembered him ever speaking this tense before until now. Miyuki silently reflected whether she had been too harsh with her words, while she inquired Tatsuya with her eyes of how she should answer.

Tatsuya showed Miyuki the screen of the terminal where he typed, “10 A.M.”

“Well then, how about at 10 A.M.?” “Understood.”

Obara’s answer was prompt.

Would it really be okay, Miyuki thought to herself, but there was no way she would feel relieved, she thought again.

“Well then, I shall be expecting you tomorrow.”

“O-okay, Miyuki-sama, please take care on your way home.”

He seemed to have some ulterior motive due to the fact that he asked it, but as expected, Miyuki ignored it, thinking that she was just imagining things, and hung up the call.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya, no all three of them did not dare to speak a single word about the incident until they got home.

Having gone back home, the luggage they packed piled up in the living room undisturbed as they changed clothes before they finally waved their self-imposed gag order.

Miyuki and Minami brought out coffee and red tea: the coffee, made by Miyuki for Tatsuya, and the red tea, made by Minami for Miyuki and herself. The two of them preparing separate drinks may seem wasteful,

but Tatsuya had resolved right from the start to never comment about this matter.

“Miyuki, Minami, thank you both for your hard work. You can sit here too, Minami.”

He gave Miyuki the thankful remark and made Minami, who was trying to grab the opportunity, to sit on the sofa.

“Regarding the opponents who attacked us today…”

With Miyuki at his side, Tatsuya made Minami sit on the opposite side of Miyuki and started talking about that which the two have been dying to know.

“They were soldiers of the National Defense Army, which has, as its main battle force, the physically strengthened combination-type Artificial Psychics whom the National Defense Force failed to develop.”

“Why would the National Defense Army…”

Miyuki’s statement was intended to ask about the reason why, and not to question the information's authenticity. Her older brother definitely said that they were Soldiers of the Army, and it was true that Miyuki had no room to doubt that.

“Besides, what are 'physically strengthened combination-type Artificial Psychics', Onii-sama?”

“I don’t know the reason why. I wasn’t able to question them because the police arrived while I was in the middle of neutralizing the attackers. Physically strengthened combination-type Artificial Psychics are…”

Tatsuya narrated to Miyuki the full account of how the Artificial Psychics were developed. It was a topic that he would hesitate to talk about in front of Minami, a second-generation modified body magician, but Tatsuya thought that being too cautious would probably be, in turn, disrespectful.

"…The development of the Artificial Psychics has been discontinued for over the last 40 years. The men who became its test subjects must be more than 60 years old by now. I used to hear that they were detained in either the former Gunma or Nagano Prefectures, but I suppose there were detainment facilities in the Suwa-Matsumoto areas."

"Were they also under house arrest for more than 40 years?" Minami turned around murmuring.

"They weren't given any roles, they are just being confined."

The closing of her eyes and the lowering of her face might have been her holding back her tears.

"…However, could it be that someone brought the subjects out from those facilities? Say, even if all of them were volunteers, they would still be living proof of human experimentation. It isn't something for us to deal with now, but they are an existence that the Army definitely cannot just keep hidden from society and especially from the media."

Miyuki saw Minami's elucidation with astonished eyes.

"Perhaps, it was not the powers belonging to that of the National Defense Forces that ordered the attack on us."

"No, that's not possible."

Tatsuya dismissed Miyuki's lingering fear with conviction.

"They wouldn't have sent such half-cooked forces in my way if the leaders of the National Defense Forces were the ones pulling the strings. Even if we assumed that they were throwing their test subjects out into the field, they would have prepared more powerful peons, particularly their overpowered and indispensable goons."

In other words, if the top brass of the National Defense Forces were at work, this meant that even if they could not defeat Tatsuya they had prepared countermeasures to dispose of the test subjects who were no

match against Tatsuya. That seemed more likely here. It was uncomfortable to ponder upon, so Miyuki decided to change the topic.

“Yuuka-san knew that we would be attacked, didn’t she?”

“That seems to be the case. But then, she might have been thinking, too, that we wouldn't be attacked if I were with you.”

Tatsuya titled down his coffee cup.

“There is also the thing about Kuroba-san’s advice.”

Tatsuya put off the threat from Mitsugu to Miyuki as advice.

“I don’t want to think about it, but there is a high possibility that someone in the Branch Families has been pulling the strings behind today’s attack.”

“…Is it our fault? Miyuki asked nervously. “No.”

Tatsuya immediately shook his head.

“At least, Kuroba-san had said that it wasn't the case. The thugs that attacked us today didn’t seem to be after Miyuki.”

Actually, there was no basis to say that the target was not Miyuki in today’s incident. Even in the face of getting attacked, it felt like they did not know who they were attacking.

However, Tatsuya had no incentive to stupidly or directly declare that.

“I almost suspect they don’t want you, Miyuki, to attend the New Year’s Gathering. But there is a high possibility that they did that not to get in the way of the Yotsuba Succession itself but to delay the appointment of the next Family Head. If ever it were their objective to hinder you from becoming the next Family Head, it would be irrational for them go through the trouble of aiming for us after we got off at Kobuchizawa Station. Long story short, it would have been quicker and more guaranteed for them if they attacked this house while I was at FLT.”

Tatsuya came up with a plausible assumption by skillfully corroborating the behind-the-scenes information that he knew about today's incident.

"I see now… No, it's definitely as my Onii-sama says." Miyuki forced herself to believe.

Tatsuya felt a pang in his chest, but he had already decided beforehand to make Miyuki feel at ease. He knew that it was merely postponing the problem but either way, it was more productive to postpone than confront her anxiety.

"Miyuki, it would be good if you called our Oba-ue soon." "Oh, that's right."

Tatsuya stood up and moved to the dining room.

Miyuki stood before the camera, while Minami fiddled with the remote control behind her back.

At midnight, she accepted Miyuki's apology while smiling on the screen, and said she was looking forward to being able to meet her tomorrow.

◊ ◊ ◊

That night, a young officer belonging to the Matsumoto Base of the National Defense Army died due to his involvement in a brawling incident at the Kobuchizawa Station. In the newspapers on the following morning, it was reported that he had lost his life in a turn of bad luck when he forced his way through trying to stop a dispute between fellow Yakuza.

Chapter 4

Sunday, December 30th. 8:50 A.M.

Tatsuya made a call to the Main House, just before leaving the house. He didn't call because Miyuki asked him to. It was his own decision.

The one who picked up the phone was a surly looking housekeeper whom Tatsuya asked to be connected with Butler Obara while using an intimidating attitude. The housekeeper was intimidated by Tatsuya's gaze despite being on the other end of the camera and ran away to get Obara.

"Tatsuya-dono, I'm troubled. Please refrain yourself from scaring the Maid."

Obara was under Aoki, hence, he had not been given detailed information about Tatsuya, and showed a relatively decent attitude towards him. He had the lowest rank among all the eight butlers, and perhaps had kept it in his mind to behave politely to everyone, but it might also be due to his temperament in being a former modern traffic riot policemen who preferred not to act under high pressure but with respect to civilians, even after he retired from that profession.

At the moment, however, he was facing Tatsuya's words and attitude consciously from the other end.

"It's an urgent matter."

Usually, Tatsuya preferred to behave quietly and avoid friction. However, today, he had abandoned the safety headgear from the very start.

“Is everything alright.”

Obara's face slightly frowned in discomfort. Although Tatsuya noticed this, the opponent had yet to be offended. If the opponent became emotionally disturbed, he would have abandon his reason.

"Please change the pick-up arrangement to 9:50 A.M. at Nagasaka, Shiroizawa."

"Wait a minute. The driver has just been dispatched, you know."

"They haven't gotten out of the Manor yet, correct? The destination and timing have only slightly changed. I don't see what's so impossible about this."

Obara lowered his eyebrows earnestly.

"It's not a matter of impossibility, but it's just too sudden compared to how I would prefer it."

"I'm asking because it is necessary."

"Tatsuya-dono, I don't want to say this, but isn't this somewhat rude? Originally, Miyuki-sama had requested for this arrangement today"

"This change is entirely of Miyuki's wish. Or would you not be convinced unless Miyuki appeared on the phone?"

Obara's face slightly blushed, holding back his angry voice. "I understand. Then, 9:50 A.M. at Nagasaka, Shiroizawa!" Even so, he couldn't help but slip out a slightly rough tone.

Even if Tatsuya had his reasons, to change arrangements over the phone at the last minute was. His resentment was already woven.

"From now onwards, please tell the driver directly to change the pick-up location."

However, Obara responded in the spur of a moment. He gave off a suggestive indication to Tatsuya that he'd soon forget about his displeasure.

"Then, is this instruction connected to yesterday's incident?"

Tatsuya also thought that this reaction was surprising, and he didn't want to turn this call into a lengthy conversation.

"Even now, please keep it confidential." "Certainly."

Tatsuya got off from the call approximately at the same time as Obara did.

◊ ◊ ◊

Tatsuya suddenly changed the schedule of the pick-up after taking into account the possibility of information being leaked internally in the Yotsuba. He neither knew who leaked the information from inside nor confident enough to guess who the perpetrator was.

There were seven Branch Families of the Yotsuba when not including the Shiba, and to be precise, more than one of these following Branches, the Shiiba, Mashiba, Shibata, Shizuka, had tried to delay the next Family Head nomination in order to separate Tatsuya from Miyuki. They were trying to prevent Miyuki from attending the New Year's Gathering for that very reason.

Tatsuya couldn’t comprehend their actions. Certainly, the New Year's Gathering was an event that allowed the Branch Families to gather in one place, but attendance was never a must. In fact, Miyuki was absent every year. Their father, Tatsurou, was not even permitted entrance into the Main House.

Moreover, there wasn’t any rule stating that every Head of the Branch Families must attend the gathering in order to name the next Family Head. In the first place, the Yotsuba Family was not a family with a very long tradition. The family was only formed by Maya’s grandfather as the first Head, and Maya was only the Third Family Head.

Even Maya herself was appointed as Head of the Family by the previous Head when Yotsuba Eisaku, Maya's Uncle, was on his last few breaths. Up to that point, there hadn't been a decision about whether 'Miya or Maya would be the next Family Head'. Maya was selected to be the Family Head as per Eisaku's will, thus, it was not a result of a family discussion.

In other words, even though they were trying to prevent Miyuki from coming to this year's New Year's Gathering, there was a high chance that they might not delay the appointment of the next Family Head.

Tatsuya had the impression that the Branch Families' Heads had been deceived by this.

However, no matter how ludicrous it was, if he was ordered to attend the New Year's Gathering, he couldn't afford to not show any effort in making it there in time. No, it was precisely because it was ludicrous that Tatsuya became obstinate in thinking that he would not make it on time. He couldn't help but to accept this feeling while receiving all this farce.

His plan of changing the meeting time and venue appeared to be initially successful. At the very least, unlike yesterday, he did not detect any car tailing them as soon as they left the station. However, Tatsuya never thought that it would all go well until the very end.

"So they found us?"

Tatsuya said so while glaring, and it was soon after they entered the country road without houses or factories in the vicinity.

"A stalker?"

Tatsuya vaguely nodded his head to answer Miyuki.

"Yes, but it's not in the car. A Psion Information Body… Though it doesn't seem to be a spirit. Rather, it's a familiar."

Tension ran through Miyuki's face. Minami, who sat in the front, was also tightening her lips with a stiff look.

"A magician from the continent?"

Miyuki's question was unexpected for Tatsuya.

"…No, this familiar is different from the Kasei-tai. There isn't even any color or form, hence, it's purely a Psion Information Body."

Miyuki blushed at Tatsuya's answer.

"I'm sorry, when you said familiar… I thought it was 'Kasei-tai'."

"You don't need to apologize. After all, we've had many opportunities to be in contact with Kasei-tai type familiars within the year.

Tatsuya smiled to soothe Miyuki, but it was immediately replaced with a stiff expression.

"It took so much time to figure out our position here. The enemy couldn't have prepared much, but be on your guard. It's coming."

"Yes, Onii-sama." "Understood, Tatsuya-sama."

Miyuki, who was next to him, and Minami, who turned to look behind, nodded to Tatsuya.

The driver didn't seem to be willing to converse with the three and devoted himself to drive the car. However, his shoulders were unnaturally stiff, his face fixed straight to the front, while only his eyes were running around frequently. Yet, he still did not show a frightened expression, but this much was to be expected from a driver of the Yotsuba Family.

As Tatsuya deduced, it didn't take much time for the enemy to appear.

"Helicopter?"

The sign of the rotor sound was heard from the rear. "Should we shoot it down?"

Miyuki, who had entered into a complete preparedness for a war, made a dangerous proposal.

“No, it’s bad to attack from here. It’s still well within the monitoring range of Psion Sensors.”

Tatsuya urged Miyuki down before she went any further. He then proceeded to talk to the driver.

“Please be wary of the front. There should be a large vehicle that will block the road soon.”

The helicopter was closing the distance between them bit by bit from the rear. They were able to catch up immediately, but chose not to do so, and Tatsuya thought that they were planning to pressure him.

It was like chasing a prey by its heel. If so, there should be an ambush further down the road.

It was a simple theory, that was why it was unlikely for that prediction to be out.

“Brake!”

Before the green light at the junction, Tatsuya raised his voice. The driver pushed the brake reflexively. He ignored the signal of a trailer which came from the side of the road, and stopped at the junction.

“Minami, put up a shield on my cue!” “Affirmative!”

“Onii-sama, what about me?”

“Miyuki, you’re a backup in case of emergency”

At the same time, Tatsuya got out of the car quickly, and from the trailer, a whole gang of people armed with automatic rifles came down. There were 32 people, an entire Platoon armed with normal automatic rifles (not the high-powered rifles specialized for use against magicians). Tatsuya faced his assailants while confirming the enemy’s equipment and manpower.

(16 of them are magicians. They are not hiding in the distance. There are two in the helicopter. I guess both of them are here to supervise the situation.)

Their numbers were more than yesterday's assailants, and there was a leader in this group.

(However, they're still not enough.)

Half of the enemies were holding guns to hold their ground. Excessive firearms for each individual. The enemy seemed to know about Tatsuya to some extent.

(Otherwise, is there a limit on the movement of these troops?) An object barrier was formed in front of Tatsuya.

The automatic rifles were set to full auto.

The barrier that was stretched by Minami tackled all of the low-caliber high-speed bullets. It was an expected result, as Minami's magic was targeted to defend against high-powered rifles.

Meanwhile, Tatsuya did not simply analyze the enemy's forces.

The remaining half of the enemies advanced. Tatsuya targeted 16 people with partial Decomposition at the same time.

The magic defense of all 16 of them was already hooked. After some observation, it turned out to be magic from the Ancient Buddhist sect. A magic meant to hide one's figure.

Tatsuya's Decomposition had easily torn down that barrier.

It was not a result of the finesse of the triple Decomposition Magic, 'Trident'. It was a feat of strength in terms of Magic Interference.

Activation Sequences of protective barriers were multiplied side by side, however, and their cooperation could be seen as sloppy.

Tatsuya fired his magic in rapid succession. All 16 were shot in both shoulders and thighs, completely losing their combat strength. They were in severe pain and were losing their consciousness one after the other.

"You monster!"

A familiar curse arrived at Tatsuya's ear from the thwarted men. Tatsuya did not even show a wry smile.

The troop had a normal combat proficiency. Tatsuya couldn't think of any other conjecture besides Special Forces. However, they lacked strength to go against Tatsuya, let alone touching Miyuki. It was an impossible task.

(Their infantry has 16 remaining. First, I need to neutralize their arms.) Tatsuya started to run swiftly.

He had turned into a hunter.

Tatsuya took down the helicopter, the hidden magicians were knocked unconscious——he paid no heed to the after effect——and proceeded to catch the man who seemed to be the Commander of the group. Unlike yesterday, he seemed to disdain the idea of fleeing. Although Tatsuya would prefer it if he'd just run away, as Tatsuya had no use for him, and he was not in the condition to entertain police matters.

He knew from the beginning that an interrogation would be a waste of time. It was apparent to Tatsuya that the man was not informed of the details while providing the camouflage trailer for troop transport, and he confirmed this when he saw the normal automatic rifles instead of the high-powered rifles for fighting magicians.

At any rate, Tatsuya left the scene of the plight after he handled the attack in a short period of time. However, it didn't mean that Tatsuya's group left without any damage. Their car was destroyed.

"I'm terribly sorry..."

"Don't worry too much, Minami, it isn't your fault. I also didn't expect this"

"That's right. Minami-chan has properly fulfilled her role. As Onii-sama said, you don't need to be bothered by this."

Tatsuya and Miyuki slumped to comfort Minami, but it didn't change their situation that they were stuck at a loss.

The car becoming unable to travel was not due to the flaws of Minami's barrier magic. The enemy used a weapon that she did not think off.

"It was an EMP Bomb…"

EMP Bomb (Electromagnetic Bomb) was a weapon currently being developed which had only less than 10 meters of effectiveness at the moment. However, if strictly for short distance usage, it was compact and could be carried in an average sized vehicle. It might not have any effect on military equipment with electromagnetic protection treatment, but a shield was not sufficient in preventing the effects on electronic devices.

For instance, a CAD originally had sufficient electromagnetic protection as it was assumed to be used within military matters as well, but a commercially available portable information terminal could be damaged by an EMP Bomb.

"Miyuki, how is your terminal?" "It's alright."

"Minami's?"

"Mine, as well, it has no problems."

Tatsuya's information terminal looked like a commercial model externally, yet the content was customized by the Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion. Miyuki's was a gift from the Head of the Yotsuba. Minami's terminal was also given to her by the Yotsuba. They were made with modern technology and were able to withstand the electromagnetic pulses from an EMP Bomb.

However, their self-propelled vehicle was not equipped with such technology.

"Even so… Why does the car which came to pick us up from the Main House not have measures against EM waves?"

The driver himself whimpered at Miyuki's grumble.

The modern self-propelled vehicle was a lump of electronic devices. It would stop working in the presence of a powerful EM pulse.

Although the luxurious commercial vehicle had been installed with protective measures against EM waves, apparently, this car had a defective portion to its shield. Otherwise, the EMP Bomb had used a higher output than what could be handled by the vehicles at a commercially available level.

"I'm terribly sorry. As I thought, it was my fault."

Even though he was not directly scolded, Minami felt sorry for the driver a little bit after Miyuki turned moody, hence, she apologized again.

It couldn't be said that Minami was completely faultless.

The magic Minami used was 'Mass Filter'. It was a magic that prevented the transmission of material above an allowable range within a constrained area. She set the magic to be 'impermeable by anything more than three CO2 molecules'. This magic, unlike Vector Inversion and Kinetic Energy Neutralizer magic's, was an excellent barrier which

was effective in defend against Poisonous Gas that diffuses and penetrates without direction.

However, Mass Filter couldn't defend against electromagnetic waves. Neither could it defend against heat and explosions. She could instantly activate the 'Vector Inverting Shield' against an explosion, and Minami selfishly thought that she didn't have to worry about heat with Miyuki around.

Nevertheless, she had completely overlooked EM waves. Minami was seriously thinking that it was her fault. For instance, if the enemy had used 'lightning' magic, her defense obviously could not stand against the attack. No matter how much Tatsuya and Miyuki comforted her, Minami failed to put her heart at ease.

That was her motivation in covering for the driver, and it was never purely sympathy.

"Miyuki, at any rate, let's call for another car."

Tatsuya changed the subject rather than offering Minami consoling words again, as he had guessed such sentiments.

"Alright."

Miyuki had also noticed the reason for Minami's self-blaming. She had no intention to blame both the driver and Minami. The monologue just now gave was unintentionally coming out of her mind. Miyuki would be very thankful if she was given a chance to retract her words.

However, it was not possible to call the Main House.

Then just right at this time, there was an incoming call to Miyuki's terminal.

Tatsuya urged her to it pick-up with his eyes, and Miyuki answered the call.

"Good afternoon, Miyuki." "Yuuka-san?"

The one calling was Tsukuba Yuuka.

“Yes, it's me. Miyuki-san, sorry if it's too sudden.” “What happened?”

“I wonder if you could move the trailer which is blocking the road now.”

It was an abrupt request, and since there was no assailant in the trailer, it wouldn't move like usual so they just left it behind. Miyuki ended the call and ordered the driver to move the trailer from the intersection.

Miyuki truly had not thought that such a thing would happen, but Yuuka was unexpectedly at the other side of the moved trailer. The driver was back quickly, and the trailer was parked next to the unmoving car.

“Get in.”

It was a really sudden request without prior explanation that even Tatsuya was missing words to respond to her.

However, Yuuka raised her voice while throwing words in frustration. “Quickly get in! I’m already at my limit in keeping the police away!” “Miyuki, Minami, let’s get in.”

Urged by Tatsuya’s words, Miyuki and Minami went in, while at the same time loading their own luggage into Yuuka’s car.

“The driver?”

“Let him figure out something on his-”

It seemed like answering Tatsuya was a waste of time, so Yuuka omitted the last ‘own’ when Tatsuya slipped into the passenger seat and promptly started her car.

The first few minutes in the car was followed by a period of silence. Yuuka was concentrating on driving.

Tatsuya could hear the voice communication unit in the front passenger seat occasionally. It appeared to be intercepted wirelessly.

As Miyuki looked out of the window, Minami saw the restlessness in Miyuki's face.

Before long, tall buildings began to be seen. 'Yuuka-san', Miyuki spoke to Yuuka.

"What is it, Miyuki-san?"

"I think the Main House is in the opposite direction." Miyuki did not hide the distrust in her voice.

"We're avoiding the police."

Yuuka smiled wryly while answering so. "Miyuki, Yuuka-san is speaking the truth."

Tatsuya took away his attention from the communication unit, intending to calm Miyuki.

"The police stretched out a checkpoint in the direction of the Main House. They didn't do so on this side for some reason."

Tatsuya noticed that she was intercepting the police's radio. It was not something that someone could normally do. And even though the external parts of his own terminal were commercially available, the contents were filled with Independent Magic-Equipped Battalion specs that Sanada collaborated with Fujibayashi on. Hence, he could easily find wireless encrypted communications which were used within the country, most of which should be readable.

"If Onii-sama says so… Yuuka-san. Sorry for doubting your good will."

"It's alright. I know you have your reasons to be suspicious of me."

Perhaps, it was due to the fact that she appeared conveniently right after the assailants were taken care of. At least, Tatsuya thought that was enough.

“However, why do the police only wait on the road leading towards the Main House?”

However, this was the point that Miyuki doubted.

Yuuka was about to smile wryly once again, but suddenly turned to a serious expression while answering Miyuki and gazing at her eyes through the mirror.

“That’s because, Miyuki-san, they don’t want to let you arrive at the Main House.”

◊ ◊ ◊

The place where Yuuka was taking the three of them to was one of the Tsukuba Family’s villas at the foot of Mt. Amigasa in the Yatsugatake Mountain range.

Yuuka led the three of them to the living room, and sat herself in a reclining chair——the house had six reclining chairs with footrests instead of a sofa——she suggested that Miyuki and the others should stay at the house for the meantime.

“Today, we’ll stop here.”

Miyuki asked Tatsuya with her eyes. Yet, Tatsuya replied promptly to Yuuka’s proposal.

“Tomorrow, shall we go to the Main House together? It’s not like we can read the movements of the scheduled pick-up car now.”

Tatsuya nodded to Miyuki. He asked Yuuka instead of Miyuki, as both of them were candidates in becoming the next Family Head, and Tatsuya answered Miyuki and delivered Miyuki's intention.

"We welcome your offer with thankfulness." "Then, it's decided."

"Wait a minute."

Miyuki showed restraint, seeing that Yuuka was smiling.

Immediately, the villa servant brought beverages. Everyone was served back tea. Moreover, instead of bringing the teapot, the tea was poured at two-thirds full in the cup and served side by side on the table. He put a sugar pot and milk pot down right before they left the living room.

Yuuka watched his backs with a bitter expression.

"…Even though he was as annoying with all the habits and etiquettes that I have, even he cannot afford to be attentive himself."

She showed an apologetic face to the three of them with uncertainty.

"Sorry, everyone in my house is used to black tea, so they wouldn't place down coffee or green tea.

"No, please don't worry."

Miyuki reached for the cup with a fake smile.

"Ah, it's a little far from the table right? I'll take out the side table now."

After she confirmed that Miyuki retracted her hand, Yuuka operated the switch on her armrest.

On the right side of the four of them, a side table rose from the side of each chair.

Minami quickly placed together on the saucer, the tea cup and the milk pot and brought it to the table right by the side of Miyuki, without Miyuki noticing that she was gone from her side.

Miyuki nodded and said ‘Thank you’ to Minami, while taking the cup of black tea in her hand.

Tilting her neck lightly, Miyuki poured a bit of milk from the milk pot into her cup.

She stirred the tea a little, while smiling and with a bit of laughter to Minami.

Minami returned the milk pot back to the table before returning to her own seat.

When comparing to the servants of the house who put down the cup brusquely, they were in stark contrast with this female maid who naturally had a delicate mindfulness for her master.

“…So cute. Are you showing off?”

Yuuka returned with a smile that did not go well with Minami’s short display.

“No, I have no such intentions.”

Minami answered so without any feeling, and hid her face by bowing to Yuuka.

That action was meant to get on Yuuka’s nerve, but she chose to dampen out the irritation that was forming on the surface of her mind with a ‘phew’.

“Well… Our servant has shown such a bad attitude just now. I’ll take it as a draw.”

Tatsuya, who was drinking the tea with a straight face, put down his cup on the saucer without even stealing a glance at the act, and proceeded to say, ‘Let’s continue our talk’.

“That’s right... Miyuki-san, do you have something to say?”

Yuuka corrected her seating posture, followed by Miyuki who turned to face her.

“I want to ask you about a few things.”

“You don’t mean… That you want me to speak of my own true feelings, right?”

The playful atmosphere disappeared from Yuuka, replaced by a sharp light.

“I wouldn’t ask such a meaningless thing.”

Against Miyuki’s sunny winter-like eyes, Yuuka’s light was caught deep in its coldness.

Miyuki’s eyes seemed to show an illusion of sucking out another’s soul, which made Yuuka divert her own.

Although before long, she returned another gaze.

“It wouldn’t be completely useless. I can speak of my true feelings well within a certain range.”

“I see. Then, I will indulge in your kind words. Firstly, about the earlier look... And, how you managed to conveniently find us stranded in such a place?”

“Well, of course that would weigh on your mind.” Yuuka complained with an expressionless smile.

“At the very least, you can believe that I have no partake in the conspiracy.”

“I can, if you would just tell me the reason.”

“…Actually, I have been secretly keeping an eye on the car which Miyuki-san’s group would ride in.”

Miyuki glanced at Tatsuya. Tatsuya shook his head lightly.

Although Yuuka had fastened her eyes to think of a good follow-up, Miyuki replied before.

“I see.”

Despite not believing Yuuka’s description, Miyuki asked the next question.

“Why did you put up so much effort into helping us there?” “That.”

“You wouldn’t say that was because I needed an escort, right? You can’t expect to convince me with such a reason.”

Yuuka gave up and sighed.

“I guess so… I got it. I’ll tell you the truth.” “Please do.”

Although Miyuki’s straight gaze could be deemed as a bad attitude, she wasn’t going to be deceived any longer.

“Tatsuya-san might have known about this though.”

Before explaining, Yuuka tried to engage Tatsuya into the conversation. Tatsuya’s real intention was to not let Miyuki know about the matter.

However, if Yuuka did not clear up the misunderstanding, the situation would not be able to proceed. Furthermore, if Miyuki was to be named as the next Family Head, she would need to know the expectations of the Branch Families. Tatsuya changed his mind because of this.

“Maya-sama has decided to name Miyuki-san as the next Family Head during the New Year's Gathering. A group of the Branch Families tried to get in the way. They must have thought that, at the very least, you wouldn’t be named as the next Head if you couldn’t show up for the Gathering.”

There was no surprise seen in Miyuki’s face. “So they don’t want me to be the next Head?”

However, she was asking this with a harder voice. “I think, only Shibata Oji-sama thinks so.” Yuuka’s answer was so clear that it sounded cruel.

“I see… Shibata-san, so Katsushige-san, as well.” “I don’t think so, though.”

However, the clarity of her answers seemed to be inconsistent. “I’m sorry. What do you mean by that?”

Yuuka did not show any special remorse while continuing her explanation.

“Shibata Oji-sama wants Katsushige to be the Family Head, but I think it couldn’t be helped for Miyuki to be named as the next Family Head. If he were asked which between Miyuki-san and Katsushige-san is more excellent among the Yotsuba’s Magicians, he would have known the answer, as well. After all, Katsushige-san is an excellent magician but only by normal standards.”

Yuuka divulged in laughter. Miyuki had failed to follow Yuuka in her laughter, despite agreeing on her assessment of Katsushige.

“Well, if that’s the case. Nobody really disproves of you in becoming the next Family Head.”

“Yuuka-san, how do you, yourself, feel?” “Me?”

Yuuka was talking about the next Family Head nomination as if it was someone else’s problem, and worried about Miyuki.

Yuuka was also one of the four in the final stage that fulfilled the requirements in being a candidate.

“I also think that Miyuki-san is the appropriate choice.”

Yuuka quickly answered so. It was too quick that the earnestness couldn’t be heard.”

“No, this way is not exactly right.”

However, Yuuka was 100% serious without mixed any mixed meanings.

“Going back two years, the Tsukuba Family had decided to support Miyuki-san in becoming the next Family Head. In order to ensure that the Tsukuba Family has a say in the matter, I am to remain as a candidate until the actual election. Although this was more to help you win over the other Branch Candidates like Katsushige-san and Fumiya-kun.”

“Why would you go that far to…” Miyuki’s question was to be expected.

“90% is purely because we think that Miyuki-san should become the next Family Head.”

Yuuka was evading from directly answering her question by saying these difficult words.

“The remaining part is probably due to the guilt from my mother.”

Miyuki complexion changed. It was not an exact answer, but it was enough for her.

“If you’re talking about atonement, then it would be troublesome. That happened against Touka-sama’s wish. However, in reality, has Touka-sama made her own determination in accordance with Oba-sama?”

Touka was Yuuka’s mother, the current Head of Tsukuba Family. It didn’t mean that she had no father, but Touka had been the head before marrying Yuuka’s father.

Touka was a magician who specialized in Mental Interference Magic, well known within the Yotsuba with her special magic, ‘Pledge’. ‘Pledge’ was done under the consent of the magician, limiting the mental activity of the subject semi-permanently. Unilaterally, it was impossible to bind the spirit of the magician, so there must be a condition of there being a key to release the partner’s independent will. It was a magic with a high utility value which enabled partial control

over someone while still maintaining the emotions of the controlled subject.

For both Miyuki and Tatsuya, it was a magic with a particularly deep meaning. After their mother passed away, Touka's magic was the one that allowed Miyuki to seal Tatsuya's magic power by casting 'Pledge' on Tatsuya's body.

"Moreover, I don't have anything to say. Since it was an order from the Head, I have no intention to go against her will."

"…Pardon my rudeness. Sorry for forcing you to say such an upsetting thing."

"I think it is only to be understood since its Miyuki-san. Please don't mind it."

Both Miyuki and Yuuka stretched their hands, each to their own cup, while trying to refocus.

"I understand the stance of the Tsukuba Family."

While Miyuki was trying to change the topic, Yuuka wore a thin smile.

"Then, why are people from the other Branches trying to postpone the appointment of the next Family Head? If you know the details, would you please tell me?"

Yuuka glanced at Tatsuya.

Tatsuya, who was fully in her sight——made her hesitate——although he didn't show any reaction.

Yuuka averted her eyes from Miyuki's gaze, and started to talk with a down casted head.

"Shibata Oji-sama and Mashiba Oji-sama want to pull Miyuki-san away from Tatsuya-san. No, they want to pull Tatsuya-san out from the center of the Yotsuba in order to isolate him from the world by pulling him away from the spotlight.

Miyuki took a several deep breath. It was ragged for the first few times, and after repeating for five-six times, she regained her calmness.

"…Not from the public, but from the world?"

"Yes. I mixed in some of my guesses, but it shouldn't be wrong. I don't know about the reason behind their actions, but all of the Oji-sama's thought that Tatsuya was not supposed to exist as a magician. They are trying to interfere with you being named as the next Head in order to buy time for that purpose."

"How could preventing me from being appointed as the next Family Head be connected to their importance in buying time to get rid of Onii-sama?"

Miyuki spoke out in monologue, though it was not her intention to say this out loud. Her lips and throat were trembling as soon as her mind exploded with anger.

"Miyuki-san, please listen to this calmly… If Miyuki-san were to be appointed as the next Head, your Onii-sama, Tatsuya-san, as Miyuki-san's Guardian, will be established with a firm status within the

Yotsuba. He would be the brother of theb next Family Head, as well as a close aide of the next Family Head. It is not really negligible in the minds of the Branch Families' Heads.

Yuuka took a glance at Miyuki's complexion. Miyuki, at that moment, had regained her calm.

"So, they want to at least postpone the appointment of the next Family Head until Minami-chan over there can replace Tatsuya-san's role."

"…I see, so that's the case."

Miyuki's voice was so cold and gentle that it was eerie. "Ye-yes. I have no doubt in this."

So far, Yuuka had tried her best not to be afraid of Miyuki, but this was enough to make her tremble involuntarily.

“On the other hand, if I manage to get to the New Year’s Gathering, I would be able to secure Onii-sama’s position.”

However, Miyuki did not think about this dangerous matter like she was trying to get back at someone. What she was thinking, ultimately, it was an outrageous conspiracy that would try to break her apart from her brother.

“Yuuka-san, we will not depart today, right?”

The four of them had not had their lunch, even though lunch hour had passed long ago. However, it was well before sunset, if they could depart now, they should be able to reach the Main House.

“Yes… I think the police are still on the move. It’s not like we did anything wrong, but if we get caught by the police, it would waste our time unnecessarily. I think it’s best to wait until tomorrow.”

“I understand. I will confide in your gracious words, so please take care of us for today.”

“I think there are a lot of things that are not up to your standards, but please use your time well.”

“Thank you very much. I will be in your care tomorrow as well.”

Miyuki’s tone and words had been suppressed to be gentle. However, Yuuka felt a soul freezing force coming out of Miyuki when she said, ‘I will be in your care tomorrow as well’. She struggled to smile back at Miyuki and nodded her head.

In the end, the three from Tatsuya's group didn't have any lunch at all, but were served an early dinner instead (the taste was unsatisfactory), before they were guided to their rooms from the waiting room.

Tatsuya spread the contents of his travel bag. He did not wonder about his outfit for tomorrow, but his equipment, instead. The customized Silver Horn-'Trident' was brought out from the enclosed within the travel bag.

He was wondering whether to use either the 'Trident' that he was already familiar with, or the inconspicuous 'Silver Torus'.

If it was a battle of magic, he'd use the Handgun type, Trident.

If he assumed for a physical battle, he could reduce the use of magic and wear the Bracelet type, Silver Torus.

He wavered for a second, but in the end, he did not take the Trident out of the travel bag.

Someone knocked on the door when he was about to close the zipper of his bag. When Tatsuya asked 'Who is it', the returned answer was 'It's Miyuki'. He left his bag open, and moved to open the door.

"What's wrong?"

He opened the door and asked Miyuki. She was alone.

"I have something that I want to talk about... for a little while." Careful of the place, Miyuki seemed to be in a fine state of mind. "I got it, come in."

Tatsuya invited Miyuki into his room.

Miyuki first went to the front of the travel bag which was left open, and began to refold Tatsuya's clothes which had been a little disorganized.

He was about to take out his underwear and go take a bath soon, so there was not much meaning in organizing the contents of the bag now.

However, Tatsuya didn't restrain Miyuki, and said 'I'm sorry'. "No, I do this because I like it."

Miyuki's voice sounded a little joyful, while her hand was still moving. She satisfied her urge and closed the zipper of Tatsuya's travel bag.

"You may sit on the bed."

He let Miyuki sit on his bed, while he himself sat on the chair of the writing desk.

Miyuki did not show any hesitation, but she shallowly sat on the bed. "Well, then? What do you want to hear?"

When Tatsuya immediately led the conversation, Miyuki inflated her cheeks in her slight dissatisfaction.——No, it wasn't as if she actually did that, but she oozed such a similar aura.

"Am I not allowed to come unless I have some business?"

"No, no such thing."

To Miyuki, Tatsuya immediately raised a white flag. Tatsuya was not afraid of even the authorities, but it was a different story when it came to his sister.

"Fufufu… I'm joking."

After being scolded by her brother, Miyuki immediately correct her mood.

"Moreover, I have something to ask you."

Then let me listen to it from the very beginning, Tatsuya thought so, but of course he didn't voice that out.

"What do you want to ask?" Instead, he asked her bluntly.

Miyuki had also stopped with her playful words.

"Onii-sama, did you know about the interference from the Branch Families?"

The thought of cheating to get out of this situation disappeared while Miyuki blinked before him.

“I had knowledge of it.”

While Miyuki was still thinking about her next question, Tatsuya proceeded to answer.

“On the first day of the winter break, Kuroba-san came to visit FLT. I was told about the matter at that time. The details of what he said were almost the same as what Yuuka-san told us just now. Yuuka-san said that she mixed in some of her guesses, but I wonder if she already knew these facts.”

“Kuroba Oji-sama…? Then.”

“No.”

Tatsuya had guessed what Miyuki was concerned about, and denied it preemptively.

“The Kuroba are not involved in this sabotage. He said that he is of a neutral stance this time. I think we can believe him. Of course, both Fumiya and Ayako will not be our enemy.”

“I see...”

Miyuki breathed in a sigh of relief, but immediately turned her face upwards to Tatsuya who had a stringent look on his face.

“Onii-sama, why didn’t you talk to me about this?”

It was not as if Miyuki didn’t know the feeling of self-blaming, but Tatsuya had his own excuse. He couldn’t divert his eyes from his sister.

“It would be better if the interferer would retreat. As long as you can attend the New Year’s Gathering, the fact that someone pulled strings behind you is a trifling matter. I didn’t want to burden you with unnecessary worrisome matters.”

Tatsuya had judged that this time's incident was a simple composition. Whether it was their hideouts and time gimmicks, there wasn't any need to sniff them out. They simply needed to get rid of the assailants. He thought that it would put her at a disadvantage to worry over this matter.

"It's natural for me to worry about Onii-sama!" However, those thoughts were unacceptable for Miyuki.

"Certainly, it might have been useless for me to worry over these thoughts. However, isn't it fine if I worry about Onii-sama! To be able to cry or be angry for Onii-sama is very important to me. I would never think of this as 'unnecessary'!"

Miyuki moved her face laterally and pouted. While his baffled sister remained in that position, Tatsuya thought that he had to pacify her mood one way or another. Tatsuya stood up and moved to the front of Miyuki.

"Miyuki."

Tatsuya tried to put his hand on his sister's shoulder, but he missed it. It was not due to Miyuki shaking off his hand.

Miyuki stood up, and suddenly embraced him. "Onii-sama, do you remember?"

"About what?"

While asking so, Tatsuya recalled a scene in his memory that would certainly be connected.

The scene from last year's Nine Schools Competition, the Fourth Day and the first night of the Newcomer's Games. Tatsuya rejected the offer to adopt his 'Active Air Mine' into the Index with his name as the creator. Miyuki came to visit Tatsuya then...

“My feelings have not changed at all from that time. And will never change from here onwards.”

Miyuki continued her words surely, as if she confirmed what Tatsuya was recalling.

“Because I am your ally.”

A scene was drawn to Tatsuya’s mind, and he watched it with his eyes. “Because I will forever be Onii-sama’s ally.”

Tatsuya opened up the storage of his memories.

“The time will certainly come. I’m sure you can do it. I certainly hope so.”

Miyuki raised her face up. In contrast to Tatsuya’s expectation, Miyuki’s face was filled with a smile.

“And that time is coming soon. It might be a little different than ‘the time’ that we have in mind, but at last, the time has come where Onii-sama can finally fly freely.”

However, in the midst of that shiny smile, he could see a drop of shadow. And that was weighing very much on Tatsuya’s mind.

◊ ◊ ◊

The current Head of the Yotsuba, Yotsuba Maya, smiled involuntarily after receiving a report from the Butler, Hayama, about Miyuki, who was attacked in two consecutive days due to the information leak and now had to stay at the Tsukuba Family's villa.

"What should I say, it's useless."

Maya was not ridiculing them, but instead she said it gently and dazzlingly.

"It seems like the Branch Family members have underestimated Tatsuya-dono's power."

The Butler, Hayama, replied with a harsh comment in a polite tone.

"This village's 'barrier' couldn't stand up against Tatsuya-san's 'Decomposition' after all, so he can come from the sky if he wanted to make it on time. If that were really to happen, everyone would be thrown into an uproar. Until the Decomposed barrier to repel intruders is completely rebuilt again, the magicians with recognition inhibitors will be overworked day and night. Building up that barrier is not an easy task after all."

Maya sighed exaggeratedly.

"I wonder if everyone from the Branch Families understands what kind of responsibility they will bear if they try to impede my instructions?"

Maya made a 'how troublesome' kind of face, while tilting her tea cup.

"Anyway, regarding Aoki-san and the others, are you sure you have delivered the correct information to the Heads of the Branch Families?"

"Yes, unmistakably."

Butler Hayama replied so after being glanced over by Maya, and he poured a non-caffeine herbal tea into Maya's cup with a reverential attitude.

By the way, within the Yotsuba Family, all of the Butlers were called equally as 'Butler', whether it was Obara or Aoki or Hanabishi or even Hayama, the eight of them, in reality, were in a position to supervise employees in each sector. However, only Hayama was in charge of private (internal) issues out of all eight of the Butlers.

Even now, during the night tea time. It was the main reason why she could speak openly. Even Maya wouldn't speak in such a manner in front of anyone else but Hayama. Conversely, the Branch Family Heads, no, the Yotsuba itself was tied up at the mercy of the Family Head that despised the family, since this was Maya's true nature.

"However, I wouldn't say that all their efforts are wasted."

Hayama witnessed all that without changing his attitude. Even now, he reverently offered a solution based on his own opinion. By doing so, he let his Master complain to her hearts content without being caught otherwise.

"According to Hanabishi's report, of both the remnants of the Great Asian Alliance’s coalition hardliners and the Great Asian Alliance’s appeasement factions, we significantly weakened their forces from waging war against the Ten Master Clans. Especially for the Artificial Psychic Center which is on the verge of collapsing in Matsumoto. In the future, let's keep this lake garden of the Yotsuba Family from such rampaging activities of any intruders.

"I have never minded over those Artificial Psychics to begin with."

Maya laughed curtly by her nose, but her voice was frank, unlike the sweet poison type like what she used earlier.

"Anyway, this means that the end-of-the-year house cleaning has come to an end?"

Hayama nodded with a faint smile at her inquiry.

"There were some changes in the setup, but there was only a little more to be done by the necessary staff so I left the rest to Hanabishi."

"Well, that's true. Fishing takes a lot of time and effort, part of the rough stuff. Tatsuya-san would substantially take care of those people."

Maya showed a slight amazement in her face.

"Well, that's fine. Hayama-san, have you finished the New Year's preparations?"

"Yes. We just need to wait for Miyuki-sama's arrival." "Then, there's nothing to be worried of."

Hayama opened his mouth with a bit of slight hesitation. "Madam, do you really not wish to stop Shibata-sama?"

Hayama knew of the plan of the Head of the Shibata Family in keeping Miyuki stranded by Shibata Katsushige and his Guardians. Of course, Maya also knew.

Maya, for some unknown reason, laughed in satisfaction.

"Even if it's Katsushige-san, there is no way he can stop Tatsuya-san."

Shibata Katsushige was, without a doubt, one of the strongest magicians in the Yotsuba's current generation in terms of combat magic, but Maya expected that Tatsuya had no possibility of losing against Katsushige. This time, Maya had a vision in making Tatsuya bringing down Katsushige.

Chapter 5

Morning of December 31st. Tatsuya's group departed from the Tsukuba Family's villa, and it was their third try to get to the Main House.

The normal travel time from the villa to the Yotsuba's Main House was about two hours. While considering the possibility of piled up snow in the middle of the road, three hours would still be sufficient. Yuuka proposed 'I think its ok even if we depart from the villa after lunch', but Tatsuya had thought about any foreseeable obstructing events that may occur today as well, hence, he wanted to depart as early as possible.

Yuuka seemed to be a night creature, and looked sluggish when she drove, as if her body had yet to be fully awakened. Perhaps, that was the reason behind her proposal on departing during the afternoon instead.

Still, she somehow managed to drive her sedan safely, and finally, they reached the entrance of the tunnel which led to the Yotsuba's Village.

Inside the tunnel, there were branches of a pathway, but the mechanism needed a flow of Psion waves in a certain waveform at specific points in order to be able to stay on the route which led to the Yotsuba's Village. The tunnel had provided an automatic gate of non-systematic magic.

With this mechanism, the Yotsuba's Main House was essentially cut off from the outside world, at least when it came to land transportation.

This facility is meant to conceal the address of the Old Fourth Research Institute. Due to the high confidentiality of the Old Fourth Research Institute, only the name is known, and the address is not known even to the highest government and military officials. As the Yotsuba Family had inherited this facility, they went around literally erasing the memory of anyone who knew this secret, completely hiding the location of their home.

Similar gates existed in a few other places, but they were heading to the only gate that operated at all times. For those who knew of it, this area would be a strategic place to set up an ambush.

At the same time, however, it also meant that this area was set under constant surveillance by the Yotsuba, and the assailants would require a certain amount of resolution.

With this reasoning, Yuuka was determined that they would not receive any more interference once they reached this place.

However, Tatsuya concluded that they would be attacked here for sure.

The difference in the two’s attitude’s corresponded to their different reactions.

From the side of the mountainous pathway, right before they entered the tunnel.

From the slope, a white tsunami came surging down! "Miyuki, melt the avalanche!"

Tatsuya shouted even before Yuuka noticed the avalanche. "Yes, Onii-sama!"

Miyuki responded to Tatsuya.

Yuuka suddenly stepped on the break. "Minami, Hemispherical Shield!" "Wha--, Y-Yes."

The avalanche was surging from the side of the road. Miyuki turned the snow into water with her magic.

The car stopped.

The hemispherical barrier formed around the car.

All of this happened in less than a single second. Streaming mud flew down in front of the stopped car.

From the beginning, the avalanche wasn't triggered to hit Yuuka's car. "Minami, release the shield."

"Understood."

When the muddy stream from the melted snow had run down, Tatsuya ordered Minami to release the barrier magic.

Before the barrier magic disappeared naturally, Minami canceled her own magic.

Whether Tatsuya who gave the order, or Minami who performed the instruction, both had a stern look on their face.

Tatsuya got out from the car and stood in front.

In turn, Minami, Miyuki, Yuuka also came out of the car.

Rocks and fallen trees were scattered in front of the car. They were washed down by the avalanche, or more likely by the muddy stream after the snow was melted at the slope of the mountain. The four of them approached and finally stood before the space.

"Onii-sama, is this meant to hinder us?"

Miyuki was also aware that the avalanche was not set to directly hit them. She asked her brother on her speculation.

"No, it's an ambush."

However, Tatsuya's answer was a little different from Miyuki's speculation.

"Come out!"

The one who shouted was Yuuka.

"If you don’t, I will not hold back!"

Despite being in the territory of the Yotsuba Family, their vehicle was attacked, and it seemed like it had taken a toll on Yuuka's pride.

After receiving no reaction, she was frustrated and took out a folded type CAD from her handbag, she pressed a side button to open its numerical keyboard.

Folded type CAD had begun being commercialized since the start of this year. A handy portion of the main body was the numerical keypad, while the expanded part of the cover was an antenna for a sighting aid. The goal was to replace pointing the muzzle of a gun-type CAD with a flat antenna which aimed at the target with the surface of its cover.

This was FLT’s newest work in an attempt to cultivate practical use of the general-purpose CAD + Aiming Auxiliary System, which was announced in Dusseldorf two years ago, that was developed by the HQ team rather than the Third Division which Tatsuya belonged to. Tatsuya used this technology in practice at last year's Nine Schools Competition,

but he was only providing the know-how of incorporating the Aiming Auxiliary System with the OS for general-purpose CAD. Honestly, it hadn't really become that different from a general-purposed CAD when comparing their efficiency and was only playing around with it for amusement, yet, Yuuka surprisingly seemed to fancy the style.

Regardless of the efficiency of the CAD, the magic that was cast wasn't a joke.

Mental Interference Magic, "Mandrake".

The magic released Psion waves that causes psychological damage by causing terror within a 150° angle in front of the opponent.

Mandrake didn't create images that cause terror, but the terror itself. By loosening the suppression of the consciousness it allowed emotions to run wild, and this produced the emotion of terror.

There was no lethal effect from Mandrake. However, anyone under the influence of this magic would be overcome with a violent terror regardless of their mental endurance, and their mind would significantly weaken. In fact, the damage might be greater for those who had received mental endurance training against fear. Those people would be thrown into a panic after being attacked by a fear that they should have been able to overcome. They would collapse, or lose consciousness after being unable to withstand the burden. It could even leave a deep mental wound for some.

Although there was a similar magic called 'Phobos', it used Psion light as its medium, whereas Mandrake used Psion waves, or, in other words, the 'sound' of Psion's.

As Mandrake was a magic transmitted via the 'sound' of Psion's, it wasn't intended to be transmitted via physical sound, hence, it could not be prevented even if the enemy cut off the physical sound wave.

However, if the sound wave was cut off by magic. It also meant that the Psion wave's propagation within the 'cut off sound' region was attenuated.

Like now.

When Yuuka used 'Mandrake', another magic was triggered at the same time.

Sound wave attenuation magic, 'Silent Veil'.

It was not possible to completely nullify the effect of Mandrake with Silent Veil. However, it was possible to weaken its effect. After Mandrake was weakened by Silent Veil, a magician could defend against it by strengthening their own Psion information field without having any aptitude for Mental Interference Magic.

"This magic… you're Kotona-san, right! I've figured out your identity. Please come out!"

However, in order to do this, the opponent must know the usage of Mandrake beforehand. Yuuka could only think about a single magician who specialized in magic like Silent Veil, and also knew her magic.

"Katsushige-san, as well, how about you come out from behind that woman!?"

Immediately after Yuuka's provocation, a shadow came out onto the road. Not only did the water surfacing the wet road evaporate, a layer of heated air with paving material had locally formed.

"Phonon Maser."

To calm Miyuki's and Minami's amazement of their sudden appearance, Tatsuya glared and revealed out loud the identity of the magic on purpose.

"I don't have any intention of hiding."

Soon after, a fine baritone voice was heard from the front. Yuuka lifted up her eyes which were directed at the heated haze. Miyuki and Minami were the same. Only Tatsuya was looking at the place where the huge rock had fallen earlier, watching three people, two men and a woman come out of it.

“It takes time to go through the scattered obstacles here.”

He was taller than Tatsuya by a single head at 188cm. His body was slim, yet his posture didn’t hide his tendency to look sluggish. His body also didn’t seem to have any discomfort with heavyweight boxing which was introduced in the force. He was an official from the Ministry of Defense, going back a single year, the oldest son of the Shibata Family, one of the Yotsuba’s Branch Families, and at the same time, one of the Yotsuba candidates for the next Family Head, Shibata Katsushige.

“If you’re not hiding, why didn’t you answer me sooner?”

Yuuka raised her nose to show that she wasn’t going to be fooled.

“I was going to answer once we were at a normal conversational distance.”

Refrain yourself! Katsushige answered so with a stiff face.

“You’re the one who attacked even before I could answer you. As usual, Yuuka-san is so combative.”

How troublesome, Katsushige indicated so and shook his head lightly. Yuuka observed his attitude from the corner of her eyes.

“Hmm… So Katsushige-san can say so even after hiding in the shadows and having attacked us with an avalanche.”

“That avalanche’s course was set not to catch your car. There was no intention of attacking you.”

“That’s right.”

The young man who had been restrained by Katsushige was covering for him.

“I wouldn’t have needed to use Phonon Maser earlier either! He’s different from you who suddenly get serious.”

Apparently, this young man was the one who shot the Phonon Maser earlier.

“Kanata-san, won’t you please back off?”

His outfit was also unkempt, like a musician or illustrator, with an artist-like youth. Yuuka told him off with a theatrically song-like sarcastic language.

“What!?”

“I’m talking to Katsushige-san now. It’s a talk between the Tsukuba Family’s daughter and the Shibata Family’s heir. It’s not the time for a servant to interfere.”

“You--.”

“Stop it, Kanata.”

The one who stopped the young Kanata was a woman who stood beside Katsushige, Kotona.

“Nee-san.”

The boy’s full name was Tsutsumi Kanata. He was Kotona’s younger brother, both of them were appointed as Katsushige’s guardian.

“It’s a fact that we are Katsushige-san’s servants. Yuuka-san didn’t say anything wrong.”

“But.”

“Do not embarrass Katsushige-san.”

At that one sentence, Kanata backed down.

“Hmm… So Katsushige-san is very treasured by his subordinates.” Yuuka spoke in a thorny ironic tone.

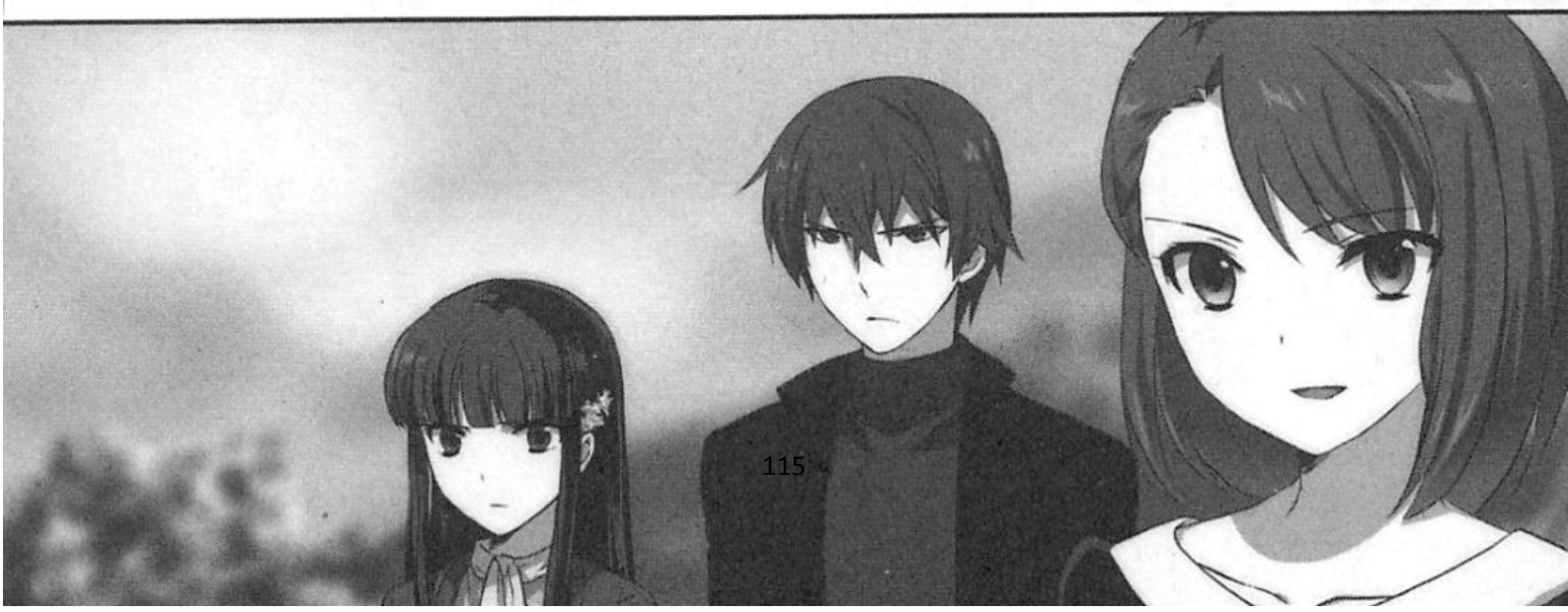
“And it’s not only by Kotona-san, I see.”

The meaning of the words could change depending on the tone, Kanata who had backed down changed his complexion.

“Yes, thanks to you.”

However, Katsushige’s deep voice didn’t show a hint of feeling which stopped Kanata from his outburst.

“I think they’re too good for me to be subordinates. I’ve always wanted to be a worthy master for them. I think we should have been less emotional as the Yotsuba Family’s style dictates. I think I need to learn from Yuuka-san in that aspect.”



This time, Yuuka changed her complexion.

“I’m also a guardian, so I will restrain my mouth as well.”

Tatsuya interrupted the conversation at a good time, without exposing Yuuka’s shameful sight, but, well, he probably did.

“I don’t mind. Even if you’re a guardian, you’re a close relative of the head. I think it doesn’t affect our stance at all, Tatsuya-kun.”

The generous attitude Katsushige showed was something hard to categorize as either being friendly toward someone younger or abrasive toward a servant. Miyuki, at the moment, seemed to be having difficulties in assessing which sort of manner she should take Katsushige’s words, but of course Tatsuya himself doesn’t take an interest in such things.

“Thank you. Then, we’ll settle this immediately.” There was no change seen in his attitude. “Hmm? I wonder what you mean.”

“It’s an easy request. Can you let us pass?”

Tatsuya’s request was as straightforward as he said himself. “I see, how very like Tatsuya-kun.”

“Excuse me.”

Tatsuya didn’t lower his head, and was only hinting so with his words. He waited for Katsushige’s response as it was.

Katsushige also matched Tatsuya’s style, and didn’t take any circuitous attitude.

“I’m sorry, but I cannot do that.” Katsushige lightened his intimidating eyes.

“Hear me out as well. Go back down this road. We won’t need to have any unnecessary dispute if you do so.”

Tatsuya nodded silently. However, it was not intended to indicate his submission to Katsushige's request. His gesture indicated 'dispute is inevitable in order to pass through' kind of consent.

Katsushige tightened his lips. Kotona and Kanata on his two sides also rose in tension.

"If that's the case."

Katsushige stated the words which determined the situation——No, he was about to state so.

"So it's decided."

However, Tatsuya intended to continue his words.

Katsushige had assembled a Magic Sequence and was ready to fire it, but intentionally cut it off and let the sustained magic formula disappear.

"…Listen."

Kotona and Kanata had their guards up with their fingers on their CADs. Against them, Minami was ready to form barriers at any time. She wasn't going to miss a single thing off her barrier this time.

In the midst of the confrontation, Tatsuya said something unexpected to Katsushige.

"Needless to say, as a guardian of the Yotsuba, I have the responsibility to escort my master, a mistress from all peril."

"So?"

"As Miyuki's guardian, I don't want to bring Miyuki to a dangerous battlefield. I suppose the two of you are the same."

"Of course!"

The one who answered Tatsuya's question was Kotona.

"I don't want to endanger Katsushige-san because of a family matter!"

She answered with such passion as if she was defending her lover, and her brother was in-tune with her saying, ‘I feel the same with nee-san’.

Tatsuya nodded with a bitter, serious face.

Katsushige, who felt like they were hanging on a deathly deception, speculated and said, ‘Hey, you don’t mean…’ after seeing Tatsuya’s expression.

“We will stay here. You will not pass through this point.”

After Katsushige tried to forestall the situation, Tatsuya continued speaking.

“In order to overcome this standoff, a fight is inevitable. Then.” “Wait--.”

“Why don’t we decide this with a duel between each other’s guardians? I’m alone, but you have two on your side.”

“You can’t!” “Very well!”

Katsushige and Kotona spoke at the same time, showing opposite answers.

“We have Yuuka-san as the third party here, and Minami will protect Miyuki and Yuuka-san in the woods. I promise you. She won’t lend me a hand.”

Tatsuya didn’t answer inconsistently, and was quickly finishing what he wanted to say.

“Let us do it!”

“You can’t, it’s too dangerous!”

Although Katsushige meant something similar, they had been arguing among themselves and failed to hear Tatsuya’s words until the end.

“Tatsuya-kun is not defective like everyone thinks! I can’t even say for sure that I can win against him. He is just like the previous head, Eisaku-sama, who is born to be a combat magician!”

“We, too, are magicians with modified bodies adjusted for combat, the second generation of the ‘Bard Series’! The combat power was embedded in our genes even before we were born. No matter who the opponent is, we won’t easily be defeated!”

“That’s not the issue here! You’re measuring Tatsuya-kun’s level within the wrong parameters! He first killed a man when he was six, immediately after the artificial magician experiments. There is no doubt about the power he holds just in the palm of his hand. He sank in a skilled 30 year old combat magician in a pool of his own blood from the very start when they tried to kill each other, neither out of an accident nor a surprise attack. He was only six then, you know? He wasn’t even in Elementary School yet at that age.”

Kotona was speechless with eyes wide open after hearing the information given by Katsushige.

The one who had lost words wasn’t just her. Minami, and even Miyuki had their faces strung with intensity.

“Kotona, what did you do when you were six?” Kotona couldn’t answer Katsushige. “Katsushige-san.”

The one who responded to Katsushige was Tatsuya.

“Please don’t spread out someone’s private information in front of people.”

Katsushige stared at Tatsuya, and showed an uncomfortable face when he looked at Miyuki’s and Minami’s face.

“Master, let me do it.”

The one who interrupted here was Kanata. He called Katsushige ‘master’ like a coffee shop owner, his words had made his sister cover her mouth.

“Certainly, he has the upper hand. If I were to face him head to head, he would certainly defeat me. However, I don’t think he could do that in a two-on-one.”

Katsushige frowned at Kanata’s claim.

“Tatsuya-kun has made a bet that he can win against the both of you.”
“Even so, isn’t it ok? Since we have the advantage.”

“But…”

When Katsushige was considering his persuasion, this time Miyuki’s voice interrupted him, ‘Shibata Katsushige-san’. Miyuki purposely called him in a full, polite and gentle manner in a cold and freezing manner.

Miyuki who stood beside Tatsuya looked straight at Katsushige.

“I have been ordered to join Oba-sama, the Yotsuba’s Family Head, in attending the New Year’s Gathering. In order to fulfill this instruction, I must enter into the Main House today.”

The smooth narrative with her beautiful intonation could even be mistaken as a song, which didn’t allow any rebuttal from any foolish phase.

“To hinder my way is the same as going against Oba-sama’s order. As it is, Katsushige-san, your action can be accounted as revolting against Oba-sama. As a child of the Shibata Family who revolts against the head, your family would also be labeled as rebels. You do understand this, don’t you?”

Katsushige couldn’t give any answer. He was standing in place with a resolution of being called a rebel. However, from another angle of the Shibata Family who was taking an opposite stance from the head, it was not a defiant action.

Miyuki smiled like an angel towards Katsushige. It wasn't a smile reserved for an ally, but like a judge who smiled against a sinner.

"However, you also have your own position. That's why, I'm not trying to accuse you of going against Oba-sama, but rather as an opportunity for my brother. If my brother were to lose, I will quietly return and leave from here."

It wasn't an intimidation, but a proposal. Katsushige, who was supposed to have full resolution in being condemned as a rebel, was cornered by the fact that the entire Shibata Family was taken as hostage.

"How regrettable that we don't have much time. Please state your decision."

"I want to fight Tatsuya-kun. Would that be fine?" Katsushige retorted with an agonizing voice.

Miyuki shook her head with an apologetic look.

"I have left this case to my brother. The case can be settled as proposed by my brother earlier."

Katsushige was still at a loss. He didn't even realize that he had fallen captive into Tatsuya's trap.

Truthfully, Katsushige didn't need to get lost here. He had come here with a firm determination to repel Tatsuya by absolute force. Since that was his first stance, he didn't necessarily need to obtain permission from Miyuki to fight Tatsuya.

Although Katsushige was no longer hamstrung, he was standing there half-heartedly thinking about the next course of action. He knew that neither Miyuki nor Yuuka would just submissively return without any negotiation. Since he was ready to take tough measures anyway, it was unnecessary to have such a conversation that led to the final proposal to the three, Katsushige, Kotona, and Kanata.

It was because he took a bad step of ‘if there’s a room for discussion’, that he was confronted with a condition he had to struggle with on the surface of the showdown. He couldn’t bear the brunt himself to let Kotona go out and endanger herself. Yet, he couldn’t say the one phrase to prevent it all, ‘I refuse’.

He was mentally cornered for a period of time——although it was all a pretense, since the situation had yet to change at all——The one who saved Katsushige was Kotona again, saying ‘My Lord, on behalf of Shibata Katsushige, I, Tsutsumi Kotona will accept the challenge from Shiba Tatsuya-dono’.

“Kotona!”

Naturally, Katsushige yelled to restrain Kotona, but this time, even Kotona didn’t back down.

“Katsushige-san, since the situation has developed to this stage, we have no other choice. No, for Katsushige-san who couldn’t choose to avoid attacking his family, this is a desirable conclusion. No matter what the result is, I can’t afford to let the Family Head Candidate lose or get hurt here.”

“But it doesn’t mean that it’s ok if you’re the one who’s lost!”

“I will not be beaten up worthlessly. I will show you that I can win in this match.”

“Kotona… But.”

Kotona closed Katsushige’s mouth with her index finger after seeing him so worried about herself.

“Katsushige-san, please look at Miyuki-san.”

Then, she guided Katsushige’s line of sight to look at Miyuki.

“Miyuki-san believes in the victory of her brother. That’s why that person doesn’t waver.”

As Kotona had said, Miyuki who was reflected in Katsushige’s sight didn’t show any hint of anxiety.

“Katsushige-san, can’t you believe in me?”

Her mischievous smile was seen in her eyes. However, most of Kotona’s strength mainly came from acting, Katsushige understood this.

Kotona comprehended the terror that is Tatsuya. During the four days leading up to her reunion with Kanata, she had discussed with Katsushige many, many times about the threat of his “Decomposition” and the wonders of his “Regrowth”. She also probably realized his abnormality as a combatant.

It was not for the sake of escorting, but as training to defeat the enemy. Despite being a magician, Tatsuya was imposed with a variety of weapons and combat skills training in order to silence an enemy, Katsushige hadn’t found a way to explain this in a short time with just a few words. It was just proving that Tatsuya wasn’t normal, even with a little bit of an explanation just now, and Kotona should have been able to understand.

Nevertheless, she tried to be brave. She hoped that he would believe in her strength.

“I got it… I’ll believe in you both.”

Then, he himself must respond to that feeling. Katsushige thought so.

“Win. Kotona. Kanata.” “Leave it to me!” “Please leave it to me!”

After the Tsutsumi siblings raised their voices, Tatsuya came forward. Tatsuya lowered his hand with a gesture to Miyuki.

To match him, Katsushige retreated. Perhaps, to follow up the fact that Kotona and Kanata needed to fight, he activated a magic to clear up the

road from the fallen rocks and trees which were scattered after the avalanche.

Tatsuya faced Kotona and Kanata with a somewhat painful look. “What is it?”

Tatsuya’s voice which answered Kanata was mixed with hesitation.

“I’m sorry for throwing a wet towel on this emotional scene, but I have no intention in killing either of you.”

Kotona’s face was dyed in red.

“Y-you won’t get our guards down even if you say such things!”

“I have no intention of maneuvering my way out of here in particular.”

“Then mind your own business! We won’t be pulled away from each other!”

Kanata replied so, and seemed to be diverting attention from his embarrassment.

From Tatsuya’s point of view, his opponents were willfully misunderstanding him and were willfully fired up, but seemed like they would suffer the impact of the collective pain when their link broke. At any rate, they had been hindering his path for the past two days. He wasn’t in the mood to let them do as they liked any more than they already had.

“Anyway, are we going to start here? Or would you prefer to change venues?”

Kotona glanced behind after she heard Tatsuya’s question. She was confirming if they had taken enough of a distance from Katsushige, but when she looked at Katsushige, he was nodding at her.

“Here is fine.” “Then.”

At the same time as Tatsuya said those words, Kotona readied her body for the fight.

“Kotona!”

Kanata attacked Tatsuya upfront. However, Katsushige wasn’t able to follow up with the result. Katsushige’s eyes were fixed on Kotona who was launched into the sky and activated a gravity control flight magic.

Kotona who was suddenly blown to the sky was falling in shock without preparing any landing posture, Katsushige reached out to rescue her.

He neutralized the gravity by applying Inertial Control Magic to Kotona’s body.

He applied Deceleration Magic to slow the fall rate. Changing the orbit of her fall through Movement Magic.

He started all three Magic Sequence’s on his mobile phone-type terminal CAD button, towards Kotona in rapid succession.

He executed the three magic’s in succession rather than one magic with three steps, he utilized his Magic Sequence in a short time, yet carefully modified the event without any conflicting details which might cause an increase in interference force needed to activate the magic. Kotona’s body, as Katsushige intended, arrived safely in his arms.

“Tha-thank you.”

Kotona who was caught by Katsushige’s arms blushed in embarrassment while remaining in that posture. Katsushige was hiding his real feelings of deep relief as he let Kotona down upon the road.

“I’m sorry, Katsushige-san. I was too preoccupied with ‘Decomposition’… becoming vulnerable to other magic from not paying attention.

“Be careful. Tatsuya-kun can use other magic besides ‘Decomposition’ and ‘Regrowth’ with Flash Cast. I should have already explained this to you many times now.”

“Yes.”

“He can only do Flash Cast for magic that uses three steps, but his activation speed is very fast. With that power, he can activate the same magic over and over again at any instant. Do you follow this now that you’ve experienced it directly?”

“Yes.”

“Then, go. Kanata is struggling.” “Understood.”

Katsushige tried to suppress his feelings to change her decision, and sent off Kotona with care.

While Kanata was distracted by his sister who was launched up into the air, Tatsuya drove his palm at Kanata’s chest, just above the heart.

At the same time, virtual vibration waves were implanted.

However, the vibration magic was hampered by another wave that flowed into his body before it shook Kanata’s heart. Kanata managed to disable the virtual vibration waves that flew into his body.

He overrode the magic with a stronger phenomenon interference force. Kanata rolled back on his own, and a snap came from his left fingers.

Tatsuya decomposed the magic for acoustic amplification out of his snap before it turned into a roar.

However, in reality, he missed the opportunity to do so. “A surprise attack, right back at you!”

Kanata wielded a specialized CAD in his right hand, a short barrel type, and pulled the trigger several times.

A Magic Sequence which emitted a sound appeared in the same number of times that he pulled his trigger.

Tatsuya disabled the vibration magic, ‘Sound Cannon’, with Decomposition before its invocation.

“Tsk, that’s a counter magic technique!”

It seemed like Kanata had the tendency to voice out every single bit of information in the battle.

Perhaps, it was to get his fighting spirit up. Certainly, the effect on enhancing his spirit in this fight was undeniable. However, from Tatsuya's point of view, it was a wasted chance.

Tatsuya targeted the Psion body. He seized control of the body movement through Psion's, and not the nerves.

"Then, how about this!"

Kanata cried so while directing his CAD to Tatsuya.

Right at that time, Tatsuya lowered his stance until he was at Kanata's chest.

Shukujihou. It was not the 'Shukuji' of Senjutsu, but the martial arts 'Shukuji'.

It was one of the body manipulation techniques Tatsuya learned from Yakumo. He also learned the name, Shukujihou, from Yakumo, but he didn't really know if it was the correct term either.

Tatsuya wasn't really concerned if it was the historically correct term. The important thing was its effect.

Kanata widened his eyes after Tatsuya appeared in front of him without any sign of self-acceleration magic.

Kanata who was unable to react, was hit and dropped his CAD, Tatsuya thrusted his fist into Kanata's solar plexus.

Kanata groaned aloud while folding his body to fall, plunging, forward.

The strike just now was not a combination of vibration magic. It was a pure fighting technique, the waves in Kanata's body that were to counter vibration waves wasn't of any use.

Tatsuya tried to strike Kanata in order for him to fall unconscious. He didn't have any intention to kill him, but he didn't mind going to any length as long as he didn't die in the aftermath. However, it ended prematurely by the quick force of the ball kick which was aimed at Tatsuya's head.

Tatsuya promptly jumped back, disabling the 'Sound Bombs' which were strewn around him.

Kotona was sent out by Katsushige immediately after the 'Sound Cannon' was shot down. Kotona and Kanata were about 30 meters apart at that time.

Yet, when she rushed him at about 10 meters, she was brought to a halt as Kanata collapsed onto the road.

Kotona operated her CAD in regret even when she called the name of her younger brother.

The Modified Body 'Bard Series' was a group of magicians who were especially good at Systematic Vibration Magic, especially in interfering with sound waves, and they were magicians made for combat. However, the tendency of their specialized magic for fighting was different.

Kotona was good at search operations, detecting interference, bewitching and damage mitigation type magic's rather than combat magic.

Her special magic included 'Passive Sonar', 'Silent Veil' and 'Sound Bomb'. Although 'Sound Bomb' was classified as a combat magic, it also served the purpose of being an auxiliary magic to straddle the enemy rather than defeating them. She wasn't as good as her brother in direct attack magic such as 'Sound Cannon' and 'Phonon Maser'.

However, when she saw that her brother was in a pinch in front of her, she quickly dealt out the combat magic she was good at. She could use

'Sound Bomb' which generated a large spherical acoustic from a selected point at a distance, although at this distance, both she and her ally would be caught in.

However, Kotona and Kanata had a layer of air surrounding them for the purpose of multiplied information strengthening with sound. For both of them, information enhancements protected their bodies from the magic others used almost as if it were as natural as their Eidos skin. Harmful 'sound' to the body would turn harmless in sight of this defense.

She used her entire body to shoot the magic based on such a calculation.

However, Kotona's 'Sound Bomb' magic activation sequence was decomposed by Tatsuya.

"He aimed at 24 points of magic at once!?"

Kotona raised her voice in surprise. Any bystander would have thought that it was such an aimless talk, when she should have prepared to deploy her next magic. For her, Tatsuya's ability to disable magic was genuinely surprising, and didn't expect that Tatsuya's ability was this high and led to this much stagnation which created countless chances.

Tatsuya suddenly disappeared from Kotona's view.

He just jumped diagonally to the sky, but Kotona's eyes couldn't adjust to his movement.

It was a simple leap with only self-acceleration magic at the moment of his jump. Although there was a considerable amount of gravity that affected Tatsuya, it made him combine it with inertia neutralization, which was very familiar to him. Furthermore, Kotona couldn't follow Tatsuya's movements with either her magical sense or even with her naked eye, as he hadn't used a continuous magic.

He changed his direction using acceleration magic in the air.

When Kotona noticed the change in magic, Tatsuya's body was already imminently close.

If the opponent had been Kanata, Tatsuya would have landed a kick. However, as his opponent was Kotona, he also had a little hesitation.

Tatsuya wasn't suddenly waking up to feminism. To strike at this momentum, he was concerned that he would accidentally kill Kotona's because of her delicate body.

Tatsuya stretched out his hand at the same time he landed on top of Kotona, he suppressed her at once with the remaining momentum.

Kotona's body fell in a moment, and politely enough to not injure her, Tatsuya laid her down on the road.

When Kanata recovered enough to be able to stand up from the damage he received from Tatsuya, he saw the figure of his older sister being held down and strangled by Tatsuya.

"Get away from nee-san!"

He quickly picked up his fallen CAD from the road and unleashed Phonon Maser at Tatsuya.

Even Tatsuya wouldn't escape unscathed if it hit him. No, if a magician had a high rank barrier magic, it might be prevented like Katsuto or Minami, however if the barrier was erected too late, it was a fatal attack had it not been Tatsuya.

The coherent waves were lost in the instant the Magic Sequence was decomposed right after it was activated, and it was as if the waves disappeared midway.

The Phonon Maser actually hit Tatsuya in a split second. However, the irradiation time was too short to even wear his clothes.

“Why?”

He couldn’t believe that his special magic had failed him, and Kanata triggered Phonon Maser once more.

A second, third and the fourth time followed.

However, his magic was canceled by Tatsuya again and again in every instance.

Tatsuya jumped again. This time, toward Kanata.

However, Tatsuya’s body was shot down in the air by an explosion caused by compressed air.

“Onii-sama!”

When he heard Miyuki’s voice, Tatsuya immediately stood up after being knocked down.

“Katsushige-san, what is the meaning of this!”

She patted her chest in relief for a brief moment, then Miyuki raised her voice in fierce condemnation of Katsushige.

The compressed air bullet just now was made by Katsushige.

Katsushige didn’t answer Miyuki but proceeded to create compressed air bullets again.

The unfathomable speed at which Tatsuya was eliminated was the result of the magic Shibata Katsushige, candidate for next Yotsuba Family Head, excelled at.

Katsushige specialized in ‘Density Manipulation’. Its underlying magic was convergence-based system, therefore, it had a wide range of applications. Manipulation of density in solids, liquids, and even gas.

For instance, if he loosened the solid density partially, a hole would occur. The avalanche earlier was done by distributing the density of the snow, by building a spot where the snow density was lessened continuously.

By manipulating the density of a liquid, he was able to produce a stream of high pressured liquid. It was also possible to reverse the flow against gravity.

By manipulating the density of a gas, it was possible to produce a gas stream and release compressed air as a blast, like a suction vacuum machine.

Katsushige specialized in ordinary magic, quite unlike Yotsuba Magicians. However, he is, by most definitions, an excellent magician who takes pride in the wide range of situations his magic can be applied to, along with his high invocation speed, the large number of invocations he can simultaneously conduct and the large scale at which he can alter phenomena.

Upon seeing that he had been unable to keep up with eliminating his Magic Sequences, Tatsuya set his decomposition to target the dynamic structures causing the fluctuation in air density.

The interference potential trying to create areas of high air density and the interference potential trying to prevent high air density both struggled for supremacy.

As a result, Katsushige’s magic ended up misfiring.

“What!?”

A startled voice leaked out from Kanata’s throat.

The difference between Katsushige and the Tsutsumi siblings was that he didn't stop his hand even after his specialized magic was prevented.

Katsushige now fully joined the fight, and was working on the next magic to attack Tatsuya.

However, there was a sudden intense rising of air current which made Katsushige stop his hand.

The violent gust that arose against Katsushige's center of mass was the result of a magic that was invoked in the skies above him.

The wind being gusted up into a vortex right above Katsushige had started being cooled down by a sharp decrease in pressure as it condensed the moisture within it into fine particles.

The wind which was sucked up into a vortex directly above Katsushige, was a response to lean air impact which was cooled by rapid depressurization, condensing the particle of fine water moisture within the area.

The decrease in pressure was due to the Nitrogen, of which nearly 80% of the air is made of, simultaneously liquefied in large volumes.

Miyuki had triggered 'Niflheim' with a high interference strength beyond Katsushige's.

A mist of liquefied Nitrogen mixed with the flowing vortex of air and developed into falling raindrops due to gravity.

From above Katsushige, sleet poured.

While ice was made of water crystals, these raindrops were drops of liquid Nitrogen reaching -200 °C.

Katsushige erected a double barrier to reflect the rain and vacuum coating.

The low temperature due to the evaporation of the liquid Nitrogen is deadly to those under it even if they are not directly in contact with it.

Katsushige's movement was halted. Tatsuya jumped three times.

Kanata pointed his hand gun-type CAD at Tatsuya, but he couldn't keep up with Tatsuya's movements which changed direction when he kicked the air three times.

Unlike his sister, Kotona, Kanata was blown away mercilessly by a jump kick from Tatsuya.

"Onii-sama, are you alright!?"

Miyuki rushed to Tatsuya who was looking down at Kotona and Kanata who were lying on the road.

——Katsushige didn't attack. "Are you injured!?"

Miyuki was worried if he was injured from Katsushige's first compressed air bullets, but he told Miyuki 'I'm alright. It didn't end with any unhealable wounds', and after confirming Tatsuya's safety, she put on a faint smile.

"Thank goodness."

Miyuki breathed in relief deeply in front of Tatsuya.

Minami came next to Miyuki and held out a hand towel for Tatsuya.
"Tatsuya-sama, please use this."

"Ah, thanks."

Miyuki sent a sharp look, not to Minami for handing a white hand towel to Tatsuya, but to Katsushige.

"Katsushige-san, I'll ask you again. What did you mean by that intervention earlier."

Before Katsushige even answered the question, Yuuka came next to Miyuki with an overlapping voice of condemnation.

“Katsushige-san, I never thought that you were such a despicable guy who would resort to that kind of trick. You didn’t only prevent Tatsuya-san’s victory against Kotona-san and Kanata-san, you’ve also broken the agreement by committing a shameless act as to launch a sneak attack.”

Tatsuya interrupted Miyuki’s and Yuuka’s interrogation for some reason.

“Miyuki, Yuuka-san, too, can we continue this talk later?” “Why?”

Hearing Tatsuya’s request, Katsushige closed his mouth.

“If you left the two of them as is, they will suffer quite an after effect.” Tatsuya’s answer was exactly Katsushige’s current concern.

“There shouldn’t be any lifelong side-effects for them considering the level of modern medicine and magical treatment that we have, but I think it would be better if they received immediate medical treatment.”

Tatsuya didn’t wait for Katsushige’s answer, he looked back at Miyuki. “Let’s proceed as soon as possible.”

Miyuki nodded silently. She didn’t even show a hint of discontent to refute her brother’s words.

Minami received the hand towel from Tatsuya after he wiped his face carefully, and folded it roughly with her hands.

Tatsuya looked at Yuuka.

“Yuuka-san, may I ask you to drive us?”

Unlike Miyuki, Yuuka frowned her eyebrows in frustration. “Tatsuya-san, are you okay with this?”

Yuuka directed her eyes toward Katsushige.

Katsushige was applying medical treatment to Kotona and Kanata with a desperate expression. Even though he was attending to the two alternately and not simultaneously, it was an intense process that would

have been difficult even for medical magicians. Moreover, he probably deserves high credit for not being driven by his personal feelings and for trying to not prioritize saving Kotona alone.

However, even after seeing that, the unfavorable impression of what Katsushige did during the 'duel' earlier didn't fade one bit for Yuuka.

"Isn't it okay? Though… I would have no reason to blame Katsushige to begin with."

Tatsuya answered, in a manner that fairly surprised Yuuka. "Eh? I mean, weren't we ambushed?"

"His job was to not let Miyuki proceed further from this point. I thought there was a high chance that the three of them would come and attack us since the beginning anyway."

When Tatsuya spoke so indifferently, Yuuka wore an amazed face. "That's why you let Kotona-san fall towards Katsushige-san?" Tatsuya didn't answer Yuuka's sudden denouncing question.

"Moreover, my purpose is for Miyuki to attend the New Year's Gathering safely. Given that some preparation is needed, we must be able to arrive today. That's why I want to go to the Main House as soon as possible."

"I see… As long as Katsushige-san doesn't further hinder you, you don't really care about anything else."

Yuuka glanced at Katsushige once more. It seemed like the first aid for Kotona was finished, even though she hadn't regained consciousness, enough to stand up by herself. Originally, she only fainted from the trauma so she wasn't supposed to take too much time in regaining consciousness. Now, he was concentrating on Kanata, and Katsushige squatted by his side.

"Understood. If you're okay with it, I have no problem either. Let's proceed first."

The four of them entered the car then Yuuka started to drive.

When they passed by Katsushige who was continuing treatment while on the road, Katsushige failed to pay any attention to Tatsuya's group.

Chapter 6

Tatsuya's group eventually reached the Yotsuba's Main House at 3 P.M.

The welcoming employees guided Yuuka to the rooms that the Tsukuba family always used.

Minami had been instructed to go to a four-person room that she had used until she went to Tokyo. She was here as a servant rather than a guest, she might have been included in tomorrow's preparation and needed to change into a housekeeper's uniform now.

Tatsuya and Miyuki passed through the waiting room in the Main House. It was between two Japanese-style rooms. Tatsuya was treated as Miyuki's brother rather than a servant, unlike Minami. Tatsuya felt a somewhat different attitude from the servants toward himself. However, it wasn't a problem that he had to call someone to ask about. He went to the same room as Miyuki calmly.

"Excuse me."

The one who opened the sliding door to say so was Minami who wore a white apron in a black long-sleeved one-piece. This outfit was the same one as when Tatsuya and Miyuki met her for the first time.

"Tatsuya-sama, Miyuki-sama."

Minami bowed deeply that her forehead touched the tatami, and said so while raising her face. She called Tatsuya and Miyuki with a '-sama' attached.

"Minami, can you stop that way of addressing us when you're here."

Of course, Tatsuya didn't mean for her to call them 'Tatsuya-niisama' and 'Miyuki-neesama' as usual. It was okay when it was only the three of them, but Tatsuya was concerned that the other housekeepers, the seniors would stare at her strangely when she called 'Tatsuya-sama' in front of others.

"No, I've been entrusted a message from Mrs. Shirakawa to you."

Mrs. Shirakawa is a lady who oversees all the housekeepers of the Yotsuba's Main House, the easy-to-understand words would be 'Chief Maid'. Her spouse was one of Yotsuba's Butlers, the sixth in order, who assists Hayama in supervising all the employees.

"Tatsuya-sama and Miyuki-sama, your presence is requested by the madam at 7 P.M. in the dining room."

Minami delivered the line with a lack of intonation, which ended with 'that's the case', using 'Tatsuya-sama' and 'Miyuki-sama', probably imitated what Mrs. Shirakawa had said to her earlier.

Tatsuya and Miyuki held their faces. As far as their memory concerned, they had never heard Mrs. Shirakawa called Tatsuya with '-sama'. She called him 'Tatsuya-dono' whenever Miyuki was around, and 'Shiba-san' when Tatsuya was alone.

As expected, something was changing in the Yotsuba Head Family. It also related to Tatsuya. It didn't change in a way that was unfavorable to the siblings, but still there was an eeriness that it wasn't their true character.

"The madam's dining room? Oba-sama is waiting for us? Did she really say so?

"Yes."

However, Miyuki was worried about another point. In this case, Miyuki's point of view was correct.

"…I wonder if there is time to talk in advance."

Tatsuya tried to think about Maya's intention in a hurry.

The dining room was used for Maya's private dinner. It wasn't her private dining room, but a place where she met important guests.

Alternatively, it was a place to dine while conversing about top secret matters.

Tomorrow's Gathering would name the next head of the family, the intended meeting had left the Yotsuba Family divided. When the invitation, no, the call was received, it certainly inferred at a single glance, especially the things Kuroba Mitsugu told him.

With those reasons, Miyuki could only think that they were about to talk about tomorrow's matter when they were called to the 'Madam's Dining Room'.

"Minami, have Fumiya and Ayako also been invited? Yuuka-san and Katsushige-san, too, are they coming? Fumiya-sama and Ayako sama seemed to have arrived yesterday and stayed overnight. I didn't know about Yuuka-sama and Katsushige-sama."

"I see."

It seemed like not every employee in the mansion was informed about the dinner. Those involved in serving would probably be limited also, Tatsuya guessed so.

"Onii-sama. A discussion at this moment in time, perhaps, it's about tomorrow's…"

When Tatsuya was still thinking about it, Miyuki talked to him. It wasn't a question, but a confirmation from her.

"Yes. Most probably, she will talk about tomorrow's next family head matter in advance. I can't say it for the other candidates since I'm not

one, but it seems like Oba-ue has her own reasons for keeping this under wraps."

"Yuuka-san has told us that she declined the seat, but doesn't Katsushige-san want the seat of the next family head?"

He personally volunteered to take on a role during the disturbance. It was possible for Katsushige to prevent Miyuki being appointed as the next head tomorrow, as he wanted the seat for himself. Miyuki thought so.

"No, I don't think that's the case. If he wanted the position as head, he wouldn't have done something that would've dirtied his hands."

However, Tatsuya's line of thought was the opposite. He guessed that Katsushige had given up on the family head position, because he could do such an outrageous thing.

"Even so, we won't know how things will go before the actual event. Anyway, Minami."

Suddenly, Tatsuya noticed something that he must confirm. "Am I also called into the dinner?"

The message which was entrusted by Mrs. Shirakawa indicated that both Tatsuya and Miyuki were invited to the madam's dining room.

Tatsuya had never had any meals with anyone else besides Miyuki in this mansion. Of course, he had never been invited to one in the past.

"Yes, Tatsuya-sama is to come together with Miyuki-sama." "I understand."

Minami bowed again in prostrating pose.

"When you need something, please ring the hand bell. I will come immediately."

She said so while pointing to the hand bell placed on the table with her eyes, Minami stood up right after she finished saying this.

“Minami.”

However, Tatsuya called her.

“Yes.”

Minami sat on the tatami, facing Tatsuya. Tatsuya spoke these words easily.

“I want you to ask Kuroba-dono if he is available to talk now. If possible, immediately, only the two of us.”

“I understand.”

This time, Minami disappeared through the other side of the sliding door. Miyuki caste quizzical eyes at her brother for his request.

“Onii-sama, do you have any business with Kuroba-ojisama.”

“It’s nothing important. I only need to ask about some things from him.”
“That is, is it connected to the disturbances that we’ve experienced?”
Maybe. I’m going to make sure of that too.”

Miyuki’s hesitation was shown in her eyes, she diverted her eyes. Without seeing Tatsuya’s face, she continued her question in a little frustration.

“Why, only the two of you!”

“I just think that its better this way. It’s purely intuition.”

Tatsuya didn’t convince her, his eyes were clouded with hesitation.
“Can’t I… come together with you?”

“Kuroba-san would probably refrain himself from telling the truth in front of Miyuki.”

“He will talk only if you’re alone?”

“It’s not like I trust that person. It’s just that he tends to use terrible words, and other ugly things that you might not be able to bear to hear, he wouldn’t hide his dislike of me, is what I mean.”

Miyuki's mouth hung open, but she eventually shut her lips down casted.

As what happens often, silence fell upon the two people. "…I understand"

The one who broke the silence this time was Miyuki.

"I'll leave the talk with Kuroba-ojisama to Onii-sama. In exchange, please tell me about every details that he had says to you, including all the harmful words that he may elicit."

"Understood. However, I will do so after tomorrow's New Year's Gathering. I don't want to burden your heart now."

"…Yes"

Perhaps, Minami had been waiting until a time when the siblings would finish their discussion, but she showed up immediately afterwards.

"Excuse me, Tatsuya-sama." "Yes, come in."

"Yes."

The same as earlier, Minami sat right down after entering via the sliding door.

"Kuroba-sama said that he's available to meet you now. The location has already been decided by him."

Miyuki who had been worriedly staring, thus caused Tatsuya to give her a 'do not worry' nod.

"Understood. I'll follow his invitation." "Then, I will guide you there."

Minami rose.

Tatsuya also rose, while nodding with a smile and having said 'it'll be alright' to Miyuki, before turning around and following Minami.

Kuroba Mitsugu was staying far from where his mother lived. She was the sister of the former second family head, Eisaku.

In other words, the younger sister of Tatsuya's grandfather, although Tatsuya had never had an exchange with her. Of course, it was his first time even entering this area.

Minami led him up to the entrance leading to the Lady's Mansion. Thence, the next housekeeper in charge took Tatsuya to the waiting room.

Tea had been prepared in the waiting room. The housekeeper who guided him began to rise immediately, what looked like an iron kettle in her hand, with the steam rising, probably because it was already in a preheated state. She poured hot water into the teapot on the spot before Tatsuya. As expected, it was not Matcha, but Sencha, Tatsuya had no reason in requesting either tea, and it was easier on him this way.

Although the teapot was lowered by the housekeeper, she left the iron kettle as is, Tatsuya wondered if it was for heating and humidifying. The hot kettle which had been subjected to an EM heater wasn't boiling, the hot water vapor was gently coming out.

Kuroba Mitsugu appeared, Tatsuya drank the tea up to one third of the cup.

"Sorry for making you wait."

The housekeeper who led him replaced his tea and put a teacup in front of Mitsugu.

When Mitsugu winked, the housekeeper headed out after bowing to them.

"It's alright. You don't need to wait that much."

When Tatsuya said so, Mitsugu put down his teacup and nodded.

He seemed to be fairly calm, as compared to his visit to FLT the other day. Perhaps, it was due to the fact that Miyuki arrived at the Main House safely, or he had decided to give up.

“Then, you said that you wanted to talk with me, I wonder for what?” Hearing Mitsugu’s words, Tatsuya rounded his eyes.

“I’m here to retrieve your promise.” “Promise? Did I make one?”

“Yes.”

After hearing those words, Tatsuya noticed that Mitsugu had no intention in answering him voluntarily, he had to make him talk somehow.

“The promise that you made at FLT if we managed to arrive on time.”

Mitsugu clicked his tongue. He seemed to regret his own carelessness, however Tatsuya didn’t intend to withdraw his promise out of respect for Mitsugu.

“You’ll regret hearing it.”

“I’m going to regret it if I leave here without listening to it.” Mitsugu pulled his lips with a bitter face.

However, he opened his mouth hesitantly soon after.

“Very well. But, I won’t accept any questions. Even if you ask, I won’t answer.”

After saying that, Mitsugu looked away.

No, his eyes were directed at Tatsuya, but the focus of his eyes was somewhere far away, no, most probably he was reminiscing an old incident.

Then, Mitsugu started his long recollection.

——About 18 years ago.

——We, the Yotsuba Family, shook our chests in expectation of some news.

——It was the late pregnancy of Miya-san. We gathered here quickly. We were waiting for the birth, at midnight, here in the Main House.

——Between that time and now, the memory of the tragedy which happened in 2062 was still fresh. When Maya-san was kidnapped by the GAA, the memory of that abominable incided which had turned her into a material used in a human experiment. The price of our retaliation, was the loss of key members of the Family, the sadness of losing 30 people.

——The next generation of life began to grow. Just that very fact was gratifying. Especially when Maya-san had lost her ability to bear a child, Maya-san was very happy with the blessing that Miya-san had. Perhaps, since she wasn't able to have a son of her own after that tragedy, she resigned herself with the birth of her nephew, despite not being directly connected by blood. Even if it was unexpected, we even thought that we might be able to see the twins reconcile their relationship. At least, we thought so.

——We soared when we knew there was a new life dwelling within Miya's belly.

——In response, we experimented with gene manipulation by overlapping countless calculations, the world's best Mental Interference Magician would be nurtured. The child to be born was expected to be an even greater magician.

No one doubt such a thing.

——However, the thing we were hoping for, wasn't only that.

——The magic which Miya-san excelled at, ‘Mental Structure Interference’. The magic that could reconstruct the mind.

——If Mental Structure Interference were to be subjected on the elderly, the side effect would be strong. However, if the subject were to be a developing child, the side effect might not be seen too much, and the fixing degree of the magic was also strong. Miya-san said that the mind could refuse interference to the mental structure.

——Then, for a fetus which hadn’t a mind and whose information was mainly undeveloped, no matter how we changed the mental structure, we could only shape a new born in order for it to have a similar power of mental interference. We were obsessed with such delusions by ourselves.

——After that tragedy, we were trapped in that kind of obsession. Somehow, we wanted to create a guardian with an absolute power. To never allow the recurrence of that tragedy, to create a magician above other magicians, would among the family be a transcendent person.

——Even if the opponent be a nation, or the world, he would protect us, the Yotsuba Family from an unreasonable fate, the owner of absolute power. The strongest magician who would have the power to destroy the world as an individual. We wanted to create such a transcendental person as a magician of the Yotsuba in the future.

——The whole family was obsessed with such a superhuman desire. The Yotsbua Family as a whole had such a deep superhuman desire, instead of an individual feeling inside.

Mitsugu’s cup was emptied. He ran the hand bell while being frustrated. The rushed housekeeper was ordered to bring a jug of water to drink

instead of tea. He shut his mouth tightly until the housekeeper finished the order and exited the room.

When there were only the both of them again, Mitsugu opened his mouth.

——We visited Miya-san that late night many times, offering our sympathy, praying for the child in her belly.

——We wanted to become stronger. To release ourselves from the clutches of this outrageous and unreasonable world, strong enough to get all the feathers out of our way.

——Then, we could protect our children with that power. Keeping them away from any tragedy, an absolute guardian.

——We only thought of our selfish desire without anything else, we advocated it from the heart before putting them into the furnace.

——Miya-san was laughing at our selfish wish, saying 'I also want to give birth to such a child'.

——Miya-san's Mental Structure Interference was supposed to change the mind of the child in her belly. That was our prayer, and it was supposed to help them.

——Maya-san also frequently came to see Miya-san. Although Maya-san didn't follow us in our prayers, her words hinted to Miya-san that she seemed to remember what love was whenever she looked at Miya's belly.

Mitsugu's recollection was interrupted. He poured water from the jug.

His hand was shaking a little bit.

He didn't really let go of his cup even after he emptied it. If you observed well enough, he tried to open his mouth countless times, but his trembling lips forbade him from making any good choice of words.

Even so, after he drank two cups of water, he somehow resumed his recollection.

——However, that wasn't Miya-san's true feelings. Yet, we weren't aware of that until the month of her delivery, less than a year later.

——Miya-san's real wish was to retaliate against the world. The thing she wished for was for an owner of a power which could overturn the world. To destroy the world which hurt Maya-san, and the world which had hurt Miya-san.

——Miya-san wished for an existence that could destroy any other group, with the façade of protecting our existence, in the depths of her heart.

——None of us realized that. We couldn't comprehend her suffering in being torn apart.

"Then, you were born. The baby whom Miya-san had wished for, 'one who wielded the magic to destroy the world', that was you."

Mitsugu told him while focusing on Tatsuya's face. His mind came back to the present.

"You might ask, how I could know such things when you were just born. However, I knew. I understood right that instant."

Mitsugu's breathing pattern was badly raged. It was obvious that he was in a state of excitation.

When Tatsuya was about to propose a break, Mitsugu continued to talk as if he was possessed by something. His consciousness was flying into the past again.

——The late Family Head, Yotsuba Eisaku, my uncle, had the ability to analyze the Magic Calculation Area of others, he could also foresee potential magic skills through the system of psychoanalysis. The magic which was used to analyze the Magic Calculation Area that was widely used by the Yotsuba, was based off a Magic Sequence created by him.

——Eisaku Oji-ue analyzed the new born son of Miya-san. How much magic power dwelled within the baby, we were waiting from him, about what he would say that we even prepared to celebrate with drinks.

—— I still remember clearly even now.

——Oji-ue told us this.

He said, 'This child has a hidden power to destroy the world'.

——He had the power to destroy all material and information bodies, —

—He also had the power to restore all material and information bodies within 24 hours. As long as one didn't die, he could revive them back to normal.

——That was unlike anything we wanted. However, it wasn't totally the opposite of our hope.

——The power to destroy everything. It wasn't a force which could protect us from the unreasonableness of the world, but a force that could destroy the unreasonableness.

——Force to restore all. That meant he could heal all kinds of injuries if he didn't manage to protect someone.

——Moreover, an unbeatable power. It was an essential resource in order to fight the world. The power for troops who could be replenished in succession, there was no need for extra combatants.

——We rejoiced right after we heard Eisaku Oji-ue's words. We didn't know what we hoped for. We didn't care about twisting someone's fate.

——A demon with the power to destroy the world. That was an existence that we, the Yotsuba Family, prayed for. Our prayer of wishing for the destruction of the world, the symbol of the Sin of the Yotsuba.

——There was no sin in the new born baby. If anything, the baby was the victim. However, we blamed everything on the baby, telling him that his birth was sinful, and bitterly a strayed.

——The wielder of the power that could destroy the world. Magic, at times, could be affected by intense feeling. Even if it wasn't his own idea, this baby might really destroy the world, sometime in the future.

——The Branch Families' heads and the successor gathered to have long discussion. It lasted several days, for many nights, I can't remember

now. It was probably from three days, to about a month. I, as the next head of the Kuroba Family, then, also participated in the discussion.

——Then, we were thinking of a way to let the baby die… No, which was wrong. A way to kill him, to be exact.

——All who participated in the discussion paid a visit to Eisaku Oji-ue. We reached the conclusion that we would 'kill the baby right at that moment'.

Mitsugu raised his head that was gradually downcast, he gazed at Tatsuya's eyes. Only a tired laugh escaped his face.

"The one who submitted the idea of killing the newborn baby on behalf of the Branch Families was my father, Kuroba Juuzou. I also failed to go against him."

Tatsuya didn't say anything. As he was told that any questioning wouldn't be entertained from the start. He waited in silence, for the continuation of the story.

However, Mitsugu interpreted that as speechlessness and shock.

"Hahahahaha… as expected, even if it's you, you can still be surprised."

Mitsugu laughed at Tatsuya's humanity——although it was only his misunderstanding——he laughed.

"You weren't killed because Eisaku Oji-ue rejected our proposal."

Mitsugu disappointed and drooped. He even lost the power to support his head all of a sudden, his movement was like a marionette.

——Eisaku Oji-ue told us to think about a realistic response than drowning in guilt.

——As a case that accidentally worked, we obtained a force that could destroy the world. It was a force which could be the trump card of the Yotsuba Family. Eisaku Oji-ue was telling us so.

——After having waited a long time, the Yotsuba Family obtained a force that must be crushed in the guilt of self-satisfaction which they sought to throw away their guilt and 'kill the baby'. That was Oji-ue's judgment.

——'Tatsuya' was made to be the best combat magician. He could only use two kinds of magic, 'Decomposition' and 'Regrowth', 'Tatsuya' couldn't wield any magic beside the two. Then, he was able to protect himself despite not having any magic even in the midst of a dangerous situation, pure combat technology. Moreover, no matter in what situation, he mustn't have any outburst of feeling, his feeling must be thoroughly suppressed. That was Eisaku Oji-ue, the previous family heads proposal.

"From when you were a baby, you were raised to be a warrior. As early as when you were able to stand up, you were subjected to training in the optimization of your body. Oji-ue was serious. He was earnestly going to take advantage of you. The one who saved you from death was Oji-ue."

Words kept flowing out of Mitsugu's mouth. However, in that part only, he was talking to Tatsuya rather than of the past. Mitsugu said unwittingly that they were indulging themselves in Yotsuba Eisaku's decision.

After he was satisfied in saying so, he returned to sink back into his inner world.

——You soon became able to walk, and the combat training began. No matter how he wailed, the child's will was ignored. As the family always resorted to locking him up, he soon gave up on his rebellious attitude.

No, his rebellious feelings were confined deep within the depths of his heart. The training also advanced at the pace of a normal course.

——Starting from killing a wild animal, then a military grade dog, then military strengthened animal, and finally a living soldier, training partner went in place.

"After Eisaku Oji-ue passed away, Maya-san took over the position of Family Head. Then, Maya-san and Miya-san made you into a subject of man-made magician experiment after a while. You are a successful example of a splendid man-made magician, then you became Miyuki's Guardian."

Mitsugu finally raised his face, and began a normal conversation.

"However, the combat training had still continued. It was quite excessive for your growing period, until it was determined that your training prevented the growth of your body."

"I also remember, what happened during that time."

Actually, he also had the memory in storage from before the artificial magician experiment, but Tatsuya was unable to realize it himself. The memory before the experiment seemed, like there was a feeling that he was watching a movie of his experiences.

"Well, of course. Since you were six years old back then."

Mitsugu's voice faded. As he recalled, he was drinking half of the water in the cup after he had poured it from the jug.

“Even after Eisaku Oji-ue passed away, your training continued. Miya wasn’t against it. It was a given. Miya had her reasons to keep you alive. She wanted to get revenge someday.”

Mitsugu drank the remaining water in the cup all at once. “You, you are Miya-san’s, weapon against the world. Without understanding the anger and sorrow of one woman’s hatred against the

world, we, the Yotsuba Family conveniently and innocently wanted a transcendental being, the symbol of our sin.”

It was as if, Mitsugu was singing. Curse yourself, Tatsuya, you were are an abominable cursed existence.

“We knew this and wouldn’t want you to be at the center of the Yotsuba. Not to give you the power of the Yotsuba, but to pull you away from the JSDF. We just don’t want to repeat our sin anymore.”

As he finished saying so, Mitsugu didn’t show any further sign of opening his mouth. Tatsuya understood that Mitsugu had finished telling his story.

“I have a good understanding.”

“If that’s the case, now declining the guardianship of Miyuki. I’m sure she would hear this from you anyway.”

Tatsuya shook his head and smiled in a sneer.

“The one I understood was the motive behind your hard to understand behavior, it was a centimeter barrel of guilt.”

“What!”

Mitsugu stood up by hitting one of the armrests of the sofa. Tatsuya stood up at the same time.

In Mitsugu’s sight, there wasn’t a single gap left open which allowed for him to kill Tatsuya.

In Tatsuya's sight, he could see a number of chances to take Mitsugu's life.

"As you've promised, you've told me the things that I wanted to know. I will now excuse myself, if that fine with you?"

"…Go back. I have no use of you either." Mitsugu rang the hand bell.

The housekeeper who guided Tatsuya at first had showed up again. Mitsugu ordered her to guide Tatsuya to the entrance door.

◊ ◊ ◊

It was 6:50 P.M, Tatsuya and Miyuki were guided to the Madam's Dining Room. Minami was the one who guided them.

Minami seemed to be attached as a servant, by their side even during the dinner.

When the sibling arrived, Fumiya, Ayako and Yuuka had been seated. Miyuki sat down in front of Fumiya, and Tatsuya sat down beside her in front of Ayako. Next to Miyuki was the seat prepared for Maya. It was obviously the second seat of honor.

A single minute before 7 P.M., Shibata Katsushige appeared in the dining room. As Tatsuya thought, all of the next family head candidates were gathered in this place. Yet, it still escaped his mind that he was invited to this place as well. Ayako was here not as Fumiya's escort, but as Fumiya's partner, as she was seated beside Fumiya. However, the Yotsuba Family defined Tatsuya's position not as an escort of Miyuki, only as her Guardian.

Katsushige was also alone here. Needless to say about Kanata, even Kotona didn't accompany him here.

However, Tatsuya was invited to this place by himself. Miyuki was a given, but even Fumiya, Ayako, Yuuka and even Katsushige hadn't raised any question about Tatsuya being together with them.

In this case, Tatsuya had underestimated himself. He was also underestimating the magicians who gathered at this table.

The five people besides Tatsuya, acknowledged that he was comparable to themselves, or at least, they had recognized Tatsuya as someone stronger than themselves. For them, Tatsuya deserved the seat he sat in. Tatsuya didn't know that they had thought that much about him.

Therefore, there was no need to feel any uncomfortable feelings that Tatsuya recalled by himself.

The time was 7 o'clock in the afternoon.

The dining room door was opened. It was a door reserved for the Head of the Yotsuba Family.

From the door, Maya appeared in a dark crimson, near to black, long dress, followed by Hayama.

Everybody rose. Tatsuya rose from his chair by himself, the other five were helped by the men and women who served them from behind.

Miyuki's chair, needless to say, was helped by Minami.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming despite the sudden invitation. Please sit down."

Then, Maya sat down gracefully in the chair that Hayama drew.

Maya confirmed that everyone was present in front of the table calmly, there were six of them.

"First, let's have our meal. Katsushige-san, Yuuka-san, if you wish, we have sake for you to drink."

Yuuka and Katsushige's line of sight crossed for a moment.

“Sorry to reject your precious offer. However, I’m not much of a drinker.”

The one who answered first was Yuuka.

“Ah, that’s right, Yuuka-san isn’t too strong with liquor.” Maya generously nodded while laughing.

“Yes, I’m afraid so.”

Yuuka answered so with a diplomatic attitude.

“How about you, Katsushige-san? I heard that you’re quite a strong drinker.”

Maya turned her eyes to Katsushige. Katsushige returned by bowing properly.

“I only look strong on the spot… actually, I’m the type who’d have a terrible hangover. That’s why, I’m sorry Toushu-sama. We have an important meeting tomorrow, please allow me to refrain myself from indulging in your proposal.”

Katushige bowed deeper this time.

“Ah, you don’t have to be so formal. I have no such bad taste as to force you to drink.”

Maya raised her hand lightly while smiling and laughing, she signaled Hayama from her back.

After Hayama winked, the servants simultaneously retreated, and came back immediately with appetizers.

“As tomorrow’s New Year’s Gathering is in the Japanese-style, I tried to arrange a Western-style cuisine course for tonight. Please enjoy.”

Maya used her knife on the terrine appetizer, and carried it to her vivid red lips.

Everyone took their knives and forks, the dinner began.

The dishes took the appearance of French cuisine, however, it wasn't French itself. Around this time, it was seen that Maya didn't require any need to be formal. For instance, when it was time for the fish dishes to come out, a duck cuisine came out instead.

Around the time they had finished eating and the sherbet was supposed to come out, Maya corrected her seating posture.

Naturally, Tatsuya also corrected his posture to sit up straight again. "Then, let's soon get to our main issue."

Maya smiled with a natural look at the six of them in her surroundings. "Katsushige-san, Yuuka-san, Miyuki-san, Fumiya-san."

Four people, excluding Tatsuya and Ayako, were referred to in the order of their age. The four of them were the Yotsuba Family's next family head candidates.

"You're the only four remaining candidates in becoming the Yotsuba Family's next family head. At last, I will name the next family head during the New Year's Gathering tomorrow.

Together with the four candidates, the six of them, including Tatsuya and Ayako gathered with Maya here. All of the employees except for Hayama, had somehow disappeared from the dining room.

"I arrived at the conclusion that it wouldn't suit your feelings well if you're told the result suddenly. Therefore, I plan to tell everyone here who will be chosen as the next family head in advance."

Miyuki was the most nervous after hearing Maya's words. For some reason, Katsushige, Yuuka, and even Fumiya and Ayako looked composed.

"Toushu-sama. Can you excuse me for a short remark please?" "Oh, Fumiya-san. Is there something?"

It was surprising for Fumiya to block Maya from telling the result. “Pardon my rudeness.”

He bowed, a tension filled look came over him.

“Forgive me, but, I, Kuroba Fumiya, the candidate from the Kuroba Family am formally giving up the position in becoming the next family head. I’m supporting Shiba Miyuki-san in becoming the next family head.”

Fumiya bowed at Maya and returned to his seat. “Hmm… how interesting.”

He responded to Maya’s words that she had already decided the next family head, by giving up on his candidacy. In a sense, it was a revolt against Maya.

However, Maya wasn’t going to blame him for this. A great gaze of interest fell upon Fumiya who dared to make his decision at a time like this.

“Toushu-sama. Would you please let me speak as well?” “Yuuka-san, perhaps, you as well?”

Maya was laughing at her request. “Yes.”

Yuuka rose and bowed in a pompous gesture.

“The Tsukuba Family also supports the nomination of Shiba Miyuki-san in becoming the next family head.”

After Yuuka returned to her seat with a bow, Maya happily raised a laugh.

“You guys, do you perhaps think that ‘the head of this family isn’t allowed to determine the next family head at her own discretion or something?”

She wiped the tears in the corners’ of her eyes with a handkerchief and looked alternately at Fumiya and Yuuka with a funny face.

"No, I don't have any such intention."

"Toushu-sama, please pardon my rudeness in interjecting from the side. The one who thought that Miyuki-oneesama is suitable as the next head was me and Fumiya. Father also eventually came to respect Fumiya's intention and agreed for him to give up his status as a candidate. There wasn't any intention in objecting to the decision made by Toushu-sama."

After Fumiya's answer, Ayako mentioned their real intention at last. Hearing her explanation, she lifted the ends of her lip in joy.

"I see… in other words, the Kuroba Family has decided to wholly support Miyuki as the next family head, in the past few days preceding the New Year's Gathering tomorrow?"

The one who answered Maya was Fumiya. "Yes, we have no difference in opinion." "Fufufu… Fumiya-san, you're a good son."

Fumiya had confirmed the intentions of Mitsugu behind this blatantly to Maya. He wished for Miyuki's appointment as the next family head to be delayed, the plot of the Branch Families to prevent Miyuki from attending the New Year's Gathering had failed. The Kuroba Family made sure that it didn't make any direct effort, that could categorize them as being a part of the group that interfered.

This step was probably an initiative in cheat their way out of the group that revolted. Actually, Maya herself had no intention to blame the Branch Families who were involved in the sabotage——as she knew that it would be laid in vain eventually——he didn't need to resort to such trick.

"Why has the Tsukuba Family decided to give up the candidacy at this moment in time?"

In the eyes of Maya, Yuuka's behavior was somewhat brazen.

"Because Toushu-sama, even when I see the current situation, there isn't any opportunity to lie, right?"

“Meaning, it’s the right opportunity to sell yourself to Miyuki?”

“Honestly speaking, we are. The Tsukuba Family wants a track record of having quickly supported the next family head. Frankly speaking, our position is falling behind the Kuroba Family and the Shibata Family in terms of blood ability.”

In this openly frank declaration, even Maya hadn’t failed to grin. “The family’s ability doesn’t lie in direct combat… the Tsukuba

Family’s intentions are well founded. Miyuki-san, it seems like Yuuka-

san is in favor of you.”

Although Miyuki seemed to be a little surprised at the sudden direction of the conversation, she didn’t show any expression of being upset.

“Now I, in the capacity as a candidate for becoming the next family head… However, I agree with Oba-ue that the value of a magician isn’t solely based on their combat effectiveness.”

Maya nodded at Miyuki as if saying ‘well said’.

“Then, Katsushige-san.”

She then turned to Katsushige.

“Before I even tell my resolve, the situation has been developed by the majority of voice here… perhaps, it is as you have been thinking as well.”

Katsushige didn’t rise, he changed the direction of his body while remaining seated straight in the chair.

“Toushu-sama. The Shibata Family has no objection against the nomination of Shiba Miyuki in becoming the next family head as has been supported by both the Kuroba Family and the Tsukuba Family. This decision has been confirmed by our head, as well as the other members of the Shibata Family.”

“I see. So it’s a family decision.” “Yes.”

Katsushige nodded without showing a hint of action from his mouth that he was the one who had obstructed Miyuki’s path. With his dignified attitude, even Maya couldn’t keep pursuing the topic, asking him about it in person.

“However, upon giving up the position in the candidacy for becoming the next family head, we have a request for Toushu-sama.”

“A deal, is it?”

Maya narrowed her eyes. The sharp gaze didn’t focus on him, but it certainly couldn’t be described as a pleasant feeling. Probably, even thinking that it was good enough for her not to bring up the disturbance incident, yet you have the impudence to do this.

“No. It’s a request. Not a deal.”

However, after Katsushige denied her flatly, Maya changed her look to an ‘oh?’ kind of feeling.

“Since I have nothing in my hands to be held against the next family head, it couldn’t be said to be a deal.”

“How manly of you. Very well, please try to state your request. Katsushige-san, what do you want?”

I, Shibata Katsushige, wish for your acceptance in wishing to marry Tsutsumi Kotona.”

Even Yuuka choked on her water flashily and opened her mouth.

Fumiya with his thin skin was blushing. The stimulus was too strong for him.

“Tsutsumi Kotona-san… She is your Guardian right?” “Yes.”

Maya showed an expression that she was thinking for a while.

“If I’m not mistaken she is a modified body, second generation of the ‘Bard Series’. The ‘Bard Series’ has somewhat unsatisfactory genes which aren’t stable, not really suitable for the lawful wife of a Branch Family Head.”

“My father also said this.”

“How about being your mistress?”

Maya’s words landed a major blow to Fumiya, as he was sandwiched between the two of them. His head down and his face was truly red. On the other hand, Ayako who sat beside him was listening with a straight face, this was probably caused due to the difference in gender, personality, or rather his age.

“You are in a relationship even as we speak right?” “So you were informed.”

Katsushige didn’t bad mouth Maya, it was a positive question for her.

“The thing is… a Guardian is supposed to be your escort for someone who has dignified, excellent magic qualities within the family, that’s one of the reasons for making her a woman. Yet, even after she was placed as Katsushige-san’s Guardian, is that an excuse to keep Tsutsumi

Kotona-san by your side?” “She doesn’t only have that.”

Katsushige was trying to appeal to the usefulness of Kotona’s magical force, but he immediately said ‘no, that’s right’ to Maya. Indeed, his main reason was to keep Kotona by his side, he didn’t think that keeping the current status quo would be a good idea.

“That’s right…”

Maya pressed one of her hands to her cheek, as if she was troubled. Although it was quite a tall figure, all of the people in the room didn’t really get the feeling that she was truly troubled.

“I don’t want to tear apart lovers from their loved ones.” Maya somehow, was staring at Miyuki.

“Just because she has a modified body, it will not necessarily end in her premature death.”

Maya returned her gaze immediately at Katsushige.

Miyuki noticed that Maya was staring at herself, and she had no idea for the reason. Although she considered that Minami had spied on her and told her aunt, she didn’t really voice out what was in her head. Miyuki recalled the time when she was frustrated with her worries, but it was impossible to ask about the meaning behind Maya’s earlier gaze.

Without being aware of Miyuki's feeling, Maya stared at Katsushige. Then, she answered the nervous Katsushige with a smile.

“Very well. I have no intention in forbidding the Branch Family Head from choose his marriage partner out of his own feelings.”

Miyuki’s body was trembling. Tatsuya looked at her anxiously, while Miyuki raised her hand to indicate that she was ok and settled herself.

Maya glanced at Miyuki from the side and returned to her conversation with Katsushige.

“As the Head of Branch Family, you don’t need to think about it that much. Katsushige-san had agreed to let go the position of family head, I’ll help you in talking to Osamu-san.”

“Thank you very much.”

Katsushige rose and lowered his head deeply.

When Katsushige looked up, Maya instructed him to return to his seat with a gesture. She sighed soon after.

“Somehow, I have no need to say this anymore…” Maya retightened her relaxed look.

“Miyuki-san, you will be the next Family Head.”

“Yes.”

Miyuki responded to the nomination with a hard voice.

“Fortunately, all who are here have willingly given you their support, that’s not something to be ashamed of, it is good encouragement.”

“Yes Oba-sama. I will take it to heart.”

Miyuki rose, at first, bowing to Maya, then carefully bowed to everyone surrounding the table. ——She was seen to especially bow to Katsushige, due to the sitting arrangement, it might have been a bad chance of event for the both of them.

“Then, let’s resume our meal.”

When Maya said so, Hayama struck his hands twice.

Meaning——although it was incorrect to strictly say that——meat dishes were carried in. After the free meal was over with, Maya ordered only Tatsuya and Miyuki to remain in the room.

◊ ◊ ◊

After everyone left, the table was being reset. A cup of straight tea was served for Maya, while Tatsuya got a cup of coffee and Miyuki was served milk coffee in front of her.

All of the employees left, including Hayama.

Maya put her cup to her mouth, she spoke to the two of them with a smile on her face.

“Miyuki-san, first of all, congratulations. Tatsuya-san, as well, it was quite an amount of hard work.”

“Thank you very much, Oba-ue.”

“Sorry for making you worry.”

Tatsuya and Miyuki bowed together while sitting in their chairs. The two had yet to pick up their cups.

“Then… I’ve asked the two of you to remain here, as I want to tell you a very important thing.”

Miyuki tightened herself, and it was seen by Tatsuya who sat next to her.

“As a Head of the Family, your marriage partner isn’t somone you get to choose at your own discretion. I already talked to you about this earlier.”

“——Yes.”

Miyuki held both of her hands in her lap. “Before that… Tatsuya-san.”

“Yes.”

Suddenly, Maya called Tatsuya. As Tatsuya wasn’t prepared to be called during this conversation, he involuntarily answered in reflex while still being puzzled.

“You might not believe me when I tell you so suddenly like this, but… Miyuki-san is not your real sister.”

A sharp breath was exclaimed from Miyuki’s throat. It was a scream that Miyuki couldn’t stop from voicing out.

Miyuki placed her hands in front of her mouth while keeping her eyes wide open, she was solidified like a marble statue.

To say that her current expression was ‘frozen’ was not appropriate. She certainly had stopped working, but the flame in her eyes swirled and her complexion had changed its color.

Compared to Miyuki, Tatsuya looked less upset. However, it was simply due to the fact that the news had exceeded the limit of what his

feelings could process. He was in a sense of shock that couldn't be cured by himself, Maya as a third party, who brought the news wasn't connected to his own.

"Certainly, I can't believe this. Because, there is a mountain of evidence that shows that Miyuki and I are real siblings."

Maya, she could still afford to smile while Tatsuya's eyes gradually lost their emotion.

"Yet, it is the truth. Because, Tatsuya-san."

"You are my son after all."

The impact of this statement, as expected, even Tatsuya would be at a loss for words.

"Tatsuya-san, you are from the artificial insemination of my egg that had been frozen before 'that incident', you were born from my sister who is the surrogate mother of my son. Your father, of course, is not Tatsurou- san either. That's why, Miyuki-san is your cousin."

——Impossible.

After Tatsuya regained control of his mind, the first words which floated in his mind were these.

——It's impossible for Miyuki to be my cousin.

——It's impossible for Miyuki not to be my real sister.

Tatsuya was ashamed, that he was doubtful about the understanding.

Of course, he didn't voice out the thought from his heart, he wouldn't be careless enough to do so.

"…Would you mind telling me the details later?"

Maya accepted Tatsuya's proposal, completely in her usual tone.

"You're right. It's hard to suddenly convince you even after I said all this, let's have a nice parent-child talk by ourselves after this."

Maya turned her eyes to Miyuki after she answered Tatsuya with a nod.

"Then, about our earlier talk… Miyuki-san, I'm sorry but as the next head of the Yotsuba Family, you have to give up on your free love choice."

"Yes."

Although Miyuki's expression was stiff, yet the voice of hope, 'perhaps?', had slipped from her. The reason why she clenched her hands at the back of her knees was not to prepare for the grief, but not to jerk when the likely delight in her premonition of convenience came into reality.

"Tomorrow, I will announce who your fiancé is at the same time as the next family head nomination, your partner is."

Miyuki gasped a little. Even though it was only 'a little', she had almost stopped breathing.

"Tatsuya-san."

Miyuki placed her hands in front of her mouth. Those hands were visibly trembling.

Somehow, Miyuki restrained her scream by moving her hands that were blocking her mouth to her chest.

She held them both on top of her heart, and blinked tightly before looking down as if embracing her body to withstand the pain.

Miyuki was experiencing a 'my chest was about to break apart' in reality now moment.

However, it was in joy rather than sorrow. She rejoiced too strong, that it was similar to a strong pain.

She was so happy, so happy, that she needed to calm her body which was in a heightened state of excitement like a madman somehow, Miyuki looked up.

Her eyes were filled with tears, she had an expression of being ready to cry.

Maya took the blame after seeing such a distraught Miyuki.

"Tatsuya-san, please attend tomorrow's Gathering as you will be named as Miyuki's fiancé. This is all I want to talk about."

Miyuki lowered her head deeply, her hands were aligned to her knees, and tears started to drip.

"Miyuki-san, tomorrow is the recital for your engagement. It's a great stage for you, please prepare and polish yourself well tonight."

"I'm thankful for your heartfelt thoughts…"

The sound of sobbing and her tremors were reduced, Miyuki answered Maya while her head was still lowered. Maya's figure was like an affectionate mother, wearing a permissive expression——however, a disproportionate cold light could be seen in her eyes——a stare.

"Hayama-san."

"Yes, madam."

Hayama showed up immediately at her call.

By the time he appeared, Tatsuya had wiped Miyuki's tears with a handkerchief.

"Please call Minami-chan. Let her make some arrangements for Miyuki-san's bath."

"Understood."

Minami came immediately.

Maya gave a direct order to Minami, she dictated that she be snappy.

"Minami-chan, take Miyuki to her room. Then, please call her out when you have prepared the bath, guide her way."

"Understood."

Minami led Miyuki to the guest room. Maya faced Tatsuya.

"Should we move to a new place?" "Yes."

Maya rose.

Hayama opened the door. Tatsuya followed after Maya.

Hayama reverently bowed to Tatsuya. It was the biggest change he had seen thus far in this place.

◊ ◊ ◊

They were heading to Maya's study. It was Tatsuya's first time to entering this room. No, there had never been anyone else who had ever stepped into this room besides Maya and Hayama, except for a few furniture maintenance technicians and a HAR. It could be said that Tatsuya was the second person she had ever allowed to enter this room.

Inside the room, there was a huge desk with a high chair with a backrest, a bookshelf as high as the ceiling, and a vintage reception set.

Hayama recommended to Tatsuya that he sit down on the sofa. Maya sat opposite of him, and asked Tatsuya with a voice that a parent would have about why he was looking around the room.

“Tatsuya-san, what are you looking at?”

“Excuse me. I just realized that the room where you always call Miyuki from isn’t your study.”

“You take notice about strange things.” Maya’s laughter was glazed like a young girls.

“This is completely my private space. Even the HAR is a stand-alone unit.”

“A completely offline environment.” “Yes.”

Maya’s answer wasn’t true. This room was equipped with a single network. However, it wasn’t a complete lie either, because that line was only operating from a specific device to deliver its search key data, completely independent of other devices, half of what she said was a true.

“Tatsuya-sama, do you mind having black coffee?”

Tatsuya could never remember an instance where Hayama called him with ‘-sama’. He mustn’t mind such a thing now.

“Yes, black please.”

Tatsuya answered him with as natural a tone as possible.

He placed a coffee in front of Tatsuya and a herbal tea before Maya.

Tatsuya had a little concern whether the smell of coffee would cancel the scent of the herb tea, but he didn’t particularly say anything as he wasn’t

worried about it. He waited for Maya to put the cup to her mouth, before taking a sip of his coffee.

The coffee, much to Tatsuya's regret, was more delicious than Miyuki's coffee.

"It's delicious… Although this might sound rude, but as expected of Hayama-san."

"I'm honored by your compliment, Tatsuya-sama. I have a little trick up my sleeve."

"Trick, is it?"

"Yes. It's a shame, but I did it with a little help of magic."

Maya revealed a happy voice in her surprise that he was willing to reveal that to Tatsuya.

"To be able to use such a delicate magic, even I am no match for Hayama-san. Truly, such a way of using magic is important."

"No, it's not something to exaggerate about. I'm just simply doing what I can according to my abilities."

Hayama's remark had invited Tatsuya into deep thought. However, Tatsuya cut off that temptation and turned his attention to Maya.

Maya as well, must have been waiting to discuss the main issue. She placed her cup on the saucer, and gazed at Tatsuya's eyes.

"Well then… I wonder what should we start with?" "Before that, do you mind?"

Tatsuya halted the conversation.

Maya seemed to know what he was expecting.

"Oh, what is it?"

Maya used one of her hands to cover her mouth, she showed a light surprised look in her eyes. However, she was not seriously playing

dumb. The evidence she couldn't hide anything was that the ends of her lips were slightly indented upward. Though it didn't mean that Maya

had a big mouth. However, she purposely smiled right before she hid her mouth with her hand.

"Why did you tell such a lie!"

Tatsuya narrowed his eyes, not because he was amazed by Maya's attitude and childishness.

However, the nature of his eyes was already sharp. "A lie?"

Maya's tone was fakely naïve, but Tatsuya didn't show any anger or frustration.

However he didn't allow any more spurious, so he put on the sharp look. "The lie that Miyuki is not my real sister."

Tatsuya declared so with a tone that might be expressed as rather gentle. He felt that there was no need to raise his voice, what he was stating was just a fact.

"No, it wasn't a lie."

However, Maya denied that fact.

She denied it with a gentle tone, similar to Tatsuya's.

Tatsuya couldn't understand why Maya was so confident, this was reflected in his stare upon the face of his aunt.

Maya sipped her herbal tea leisurely.

"You said that there is a mountain of evidence that the both of you are real siblings, but can you really call it evidence?"

She put down her cup and gazed at Tatsuya's eyes with an up-from-under look. Maya asked several questions while retaining that posture.

Maya didn't laugh out loud, but smiled with a joyful smile. A delightful light was dancing flashily around her eyes.

“Family registration? We don’t really care about such things, do we? DNA make up? That’s also a result that the hospital sent right? It’s not like Tatsuya-san’s own examination.”

Maya’s lips were a distorted clean crescent-shape.

“The Heads of the Branch Families only knew about Nee-san’s pregnancy. Even they didn’t know about anything that happened before her pregnancy, you know?”

Maya’s words stirred up his suspicion. Even for Tatsuya, it was irrefutable.”

“Oba-ue.”

However, Tatsuya’s voice wasn’t upset.

The unwavering voice struck Maya like a liquid iron, which erased the smile on her face.

“Who do you think I am?”

This time, it was Tatsuya’s turn to stare at Maya in silence.

“I can recognize the structure and components of material; it is one of my abilities to decompose the material into any phase of configuration. I can recognize the substance of components as well, it also means that I know about the base substances which make up something.”

“I thought your information analysis is limited to 24 hours of retrospective in time.”

“The information of the components is currently located in the present. There isn’t any need for retrospective in time.”

Maya’s and Hayama’s expressions were consistent in showing that they didn’t expect the ‘unexpected’, but their feelings were based on different reason. Maya wore a ‘damn…’ face, while Hayama’s shock was only a simple shock shown on his face.

"That's why I know. Miyuki and I have the exact same element in our bodies. I can clearly see that both of our bodies were formed by the same source of sperm from the same man and eggs from the same woman."

"Oh my…"

Maya's tone was one of saying 'I surrender'. "You are really set apart from other people." "I'm afraid so."

"I don't mean to praise you though…"

Maya smiled with a hint of embarrassment, she dropped her eyes to the tea cup. Yet, she didn't reach out for the cup, and returned her gaze to Tatsuya by raising her face.

"Very well. I'll admit it."

"Certainly, the thing I've said just now was a lie."

"You were not born from my egg, but you are truly Nee-san's child."

…Tatsuya sighed lightly at the unapologetic confession from Maya.
"Then why did you say such a thing?"

"However, it wasn't completely wrong that you and Miyuki aren't real siblings."

Although Maya's words didn't answer Tatsuya's question, Tatsuya also didn't miss a single word. He was as calm as can be when waiting for the continuation of Maya's explanation.

"Because, Miyuki-san has a modified body."

Tatsuya opened his eyes widely. He stopped breathing and couldn't speak a word immediately.

"…Miyuki was genetically engineered? But there are no signs."

"Yet, it's the truth. Miyuki-san was made to nullify the distortion, to stabilize the instability, she can be said to have a 'perfect modified body', the Masterpiece of the Yotsuba."

"Why…"

"Why did we make Miyuki-san? It's for you, Tatsuya-san."

Tatsuya was completely speechless. It was probably impossible, but had his heart received more of a shock, his consciousness would probably be bleached.

"Your power is something that mustn't be allowed to be activated in an outburst in any circumstances. Although it's a perfect strength for the case of an emergency, it must be stopped before it deprives you from having a life. It was possible for Nee-san to do so. Her Mental Structure Interference can force her way to interfere with the unconscious area of the opponent by closing their 'Gate' temporarily. However, Nee-san would die before you for sure. That's why, it was necessary to create a magician who would always be at your side, Miyuki was created to stop you."

Maya had a serious look so much that it was scary, she stared at Tatsuya's eyes.

"Miyuki has a modified body who was created in order to stop you."
"Miyuki, for me? Not me, for Miyuki?"

Tatsuya was dazzlingly stunned. He wasn't even aware of the irrationality in his own words.

"That's right. Miyuki-san was a girl born only for you." Maya softened her look and tone.

“In the first place, how could someone be born to be so beautiful naturally? With such a perfect appearance, completely symmetrical body, there’s no way someone like that is born naturally.”

Perhaps, Maya noticed the jealousy mixed in her voice, she wore an uncomfortable smile.

“Although I don’t think that we could successfully recreate a childlike Miyuki-san even if we were to repeat the same procedure that made her. In that sense, she exceeds the nature of humans, perhaps, even a God-like miraculous beauty.

“Does Miyuki know about this?”

Maya shook her head while smiling mercifully to Tatsuya’s question.

“No. I don’t want to let Miyuki-san know, and not a single Head of the Branch Families know either. The only ones who know about this are the late previous family head, Eisaku-ojisama, my late Neesan, me, Hayama-san, and the former head who oversaw the modifying facility, Kurebayashi-san and his few of confidants… Hey, Tatsuya-san.”

Maya tried to fix Tatsuya’s mood, she talked to him with a sweet voice.

“The bond between you and Miyuki-san is stronger than that of a parent and child, strictly speaking from a genetic point of view, the genetic relationship between you and me is much closer than you and Miyuki-san.”

Maya graced Tatsuya saying such words with a sweet voice. “Moreover, the fact that you are my son might not be a complete fault.”

“But.”

Tatsuya’s rebuttal was interrupted by a honey like voice that seemed to wrap around him.

“Certainly, we are nephew and aunt genetically. But spiritually speaking, you are my son, Tatsuya-san.”

“Spiritually?”

Tatsuya couldn’t understand Maya’s words, so he decided to listen further in silence.

“Originally, all of Oji-sama’s and also Mitsugu’s generation were disappointed and feared your power. However, I was happy. I was cheering to the point that I wanted to dance out of joy. Because, your magic is the key that can fulfill my wish.”

She was probably recalling that time, Maya looked like she was about to tremble, she had a floating ecstatic expression.

“Your magic, is the star of death that will change the world. I can retaliate against the world. The world which took my past and my future, and tore away my modest happiness as a woman in a cruel way.”

The sweetness in Maya’s voice, had been contaminated with a curse, her grudge against the world.

“That’s why, it wasn’t a lie when I said I’m your mother. Because, the one who wished for your birth wasn’t Nee-san. You were born to this world by my desire. Mitsugu-san and the others were mistaken about that. The one who wished for the world’s destruction is me, it’s my prayer. You were born to answer my feelings. You’re biologically Nee-san’s son, but the one who wished for you to be the way you are as a magician, was me. That’s why, as a magician, you are my son.”

“However, Oba-ue isn’t supposed to be able to use Mental Interference Magic.”

The words of objection barely slipped from Tatsuya, which also weren’t able to halt Maya.

“Yes, you’re right. That’s why it was a miracle. My strong wish had overturned magic and caused an out of place event. Perhaps, due to the fact that we’re twins. Nee-san is my twin after all, perhaps, her magic

was moved due to my will. The feelings for my sister's son, as my strong prayer was dedicated to you, I wonder if Nee-san's magic realized about my wish."

Maya spoke enthusiastically. No, she was feverish.

"Nee-san knew that. That the magic of her baby, had been quietly taken over by me. Nee-san had deprived me from myself, and I deprived her son from her. What terrible sisters."

She wasn't snorting, but voicing out with a passionate and sweet voice.

"Even so, Nee-san had tried to love you. Although in the end, she wasn't able to love you, do you know how much effort she put in?"

While trying to explain about Miya to Tatsuya, Maya's voice didn't hide that she was ridiculing her sister.

"The Artificial Magician Experiment, was to keep your magic in check from running out of control because of an outburst from an emotional influence. That was the true purpose. So you are in a real sense, an experimental material without an experiment body, you weren't just a sample. Although Nee-san had been reluctant right until the end, in the end, you might become a destroyer of the world, massacre of humanity, she subjected you to this, in order to prevent you from becoming satan. In order to only take your strong feelings, it took everything out of Nee-san. Actually, it was much simpler to blot out all of your emotions, the burden on Nee-san would've also been much smaller. Nee-san knew that it would shorten her own life, but she still carefully modified your mind.

The mind that had been twisted by me before you were born, Nee-san didn't try to run away, but to modify you."

Maya's talk was halted; it was due to the fact that she was out of breath. She didn't even drink her tea, before resuming her story.

"In order for Miyuki-san to be able to stop you indiscriminately, Nee-san tried to train her to be indifferent of you. Without interest, there wouldn't be any hatred. And there was nothing to turn into pain. She didn't want to stop your outbursts due to overwhelming emotion with 'Cocytus', and there was no guarantee that you'd be stopped either."

There was such a deep thought behind the indifferent attitude of his mother, this was hard to believe all of a sudden. Perhaps if not Tatsuya, no one else would believe it either.

"It was for the same reason that Miyuki was educated thoroughly as a lady. So that her magic wouldn't be based on her emotions. Always under control like a lady, and never to cause a hysteria like baring her feelings, she was shaped to grow into such a girl. I'd like to say that it has been completely successful, but in the first place, there's no such thing as a perfect lady anyway."

"…Miyuki is a perfect lady. My sister's magic tends to run wild due to the effect of 'Pledge'."

"Oh my."

Maya was spouting 'pfft'.

"You siblings really have a good relationship. Seems like you'd do good as her fiancé from here onwards.

"Regardless of any psychological or physical connection, it is unquestionable that we are real siblings. Therefore, it's impossible for us to be a couple right?"

"Why?"

"Even if you ask why…"

It was too obvious, Tatsuya failed to mention the reason immediately.

"In case you're groundlessly concerned about your future children to be born with genetic abnormalities. Like I said earlier, Miyuki-san was

brought together to have the best ‘perfect modified body’ from the technology of the Yotsuba. She not only was genetically engineered, but also thoroughly mentally adjusted by Mental Interference Magic. That child can overcome all the defects of a modified body, a Masterpiece of the Yotsuba which was completed in a human being and brought her to the next level. She is different from the failure of the Kudou Family.

Children born between you and Miyuki won’t have any defects. I guarantee that in the name of the Yotsuba. There isn’t a single gene in her that can lead to any abnormalities.

“But…”

“I’m sure that she won’t even mind that she has a modified body. Perhaps, she would even rejoice over that fact. By modification, she will figure out that your body and her body’s genetic relation is quite far apart. That she is biologically connected to you is something inevitable after all.”

What Maya said might be correct. At the very least, Tatsuya couldn’t point out any mistakes, to tell the truth, Tatsuya already had an idea about this.

Miyuki's body was undeniable, it came from the same cell components of the same parents as Tatsuya.

However, there were also certain mixed elements that he couldn't explain.

Tatsuya understood that they didn't cause harmful bodily effects to Miyuki's body. Hence, he was thinking of those factors as natural mutation products. However, considering that they were brought about by modification, the large differences between him and Miyuki's 'components' could be a more rational interpretation. He couldn't help to admit so unwillingly.

"Tatsuya-san. You can tell Miyuki-san about this. That Miyuki-san has a modified body made for you, and also the fact that she physically and mentally doesn't carry any factor that can cause disabilities at all. At the very least, there won't be any problems physically for you and Miyuki-san to marry each other."

Tatsuya stared at Maya's face.

Maya also, returned a stare in silence.

"…Understood. Certainly, this is not something to be hidden from her." Tatsuya nodded after hesitating for quite a significant amount of time. "That's right. If you leave it as is, Miyuki-san will get worried."

Even though Maya's words were intended as a joke, Tatsuya couldn't deny them.

"Please cherish Miyuki-san." Suddenly, Maya changed her tone.

"When you lose Miyuki, you'll break apart. Your mind was designed to be that way. And when you break, you can burn the world."

It was a prophecy, no, it was the tone of a prophecy.

"That's why, please protect and cherish Miyuki-san with your hand for life."

After that, Maya told her true feelings. “Actually, I don’t really care either way.”

Within her eyes, the most intense light in the night could be seen.

“That time, when you destroy the world, the revenge of my heart will be completed.”

The hottest, flame of passion was lit.

“If you are able to protect Miyuki from the malice of the world, my revenge would take on another form. It is the revenge of a person who yielded against the world that trampled on the fate of people with arrogance.”

The name of that flame was madness.

“I’m sure I would be able to forget that scoffed ungraceful appearance that I received from the unfairness of the world.”

In the midst of her flame of madness, Maya put on an innocent smile.

“What a lovely thing that would be. What a wonderful son you are. You will fulfill my revenge. For ‘Yotsuba Maya’ who died at the age of 12.”

“Oba-ue. You’re crazy.”

“For that purpose, Tatsuya. You will marry Miyuki. I will not take any objections.”

Tatsuya’s words didn’t reach Maya’s consciousness. Even if she heard it, it failed to reach being recognized by Maya’s heart.

Hayama proceeded next to Maya, he replaced the herbal tea which had gone cold with a new one.

Maya directed her eyes to Tatsuya, with a drastic change, that not even a hint of madness was visible to Tatsuya.

“Tatsuya-san, do you want more coffee?” “No, I’m fine.”

“Really? Ah, it’s already this late.”

The dinner was over at 9 P.M. Now, the hand of time was past 10 P.M. Tatsuya didn't realize it by himself, but thinking about Maya's explanation seemed to take an unexpectedly considerable amount of time.

"We have an agenda for tomorrow; we should end this soon. Tatsuya-san, do you still have anything to ask?"

"Then in the grace of your words, one last thing."

Tatsuya was concerned that Maya's madness might burn again, so he decided to ask about the things that he must know the answer to now.

"Oh, what is it?"

"Why did you choose tomorrow? Do you have any reason in announcing that I'm your son, that I will be announced as Miyuki's fiancé?"

Certainly, the New Year's Gathering is the meeting where everyone in the families are updated about the key condition of the Yotsuba. It was the most suitable to nominate Miyuki.

However, for Tatsuya, it was somewhat a weak reason for Maya to push all these things to be announced tomorrow as well.

"It's not like we have to do it tomorrow, but I do have one reason."

Contrary to Tatsuya's concerns, Maya was calm, and she answered his question as if she was amused by something.

"Originally, I didn't have any plan to announce you as my son at this year's New Year's Gathering. However, Tatsuya-san as well, you used such a flashy stunt."

The one she referred as 'flashy stunt' was him using Material Burst to annihilate the GAA Fleet, there was no need for Tatsuya to confirm this.

“And then, the USNA had moved their Joint Chief Staff which directly controls magician troops, they even ordered a curfew for their investigation, you were that attention-grabber.”

“I’m sorry for that.”

Tatsuya involuntarily smiled wryly. He didn’t think that ‘whether there was a meaning for such confinement instruction’. At least for Tatsuya, it only looked like an afterthought of a reason.

“It’s good that it has passed.”

Maya nodded lightly. Even when her madness was hidden in the shadows, her familiarity to Tatsuya remained.

“But, even after the Stars withdrew from Japan, and Kudou-sensei went mad, or even the overseas Chinese Houjutsu user, you have been involved in various behind the scene jobs.”

The Kudou Family went mad, would be a comment for Parasite Dolls. The overseas Chinese Houjutsu user was Zhou Gongjin.

After hearing that, Tatsuya thought, ‘certainly, many things happened this year’. Putting aside Maya's convenience, Tatsuya certainly had no intention in being involved in a fight with the Yotsuba.

“That’s why, in the end, your debut is brought up to the New Year’s Gathering tomorrow.”

“So that’s the case.”

Tatsuya, for once, showed an understanding. At the very least, he found out that there was an opportunity and a need to spread the lie that he was Maya's son during the Gathering tomorrow.

——However, that also didn’t mean anything. “Then, this is the end of my explanation for real.”

Maya showed a satisfied smile. This discussion seemed to end with her being satisfied. At the very least, she managed to convince Tatsuya to a certain degree after all.

“Tatsuya-san, do you know where your room is?” “I’m alright, Oba-ue.”

“Really?”

Maya didn’t seem to mind when Tatsuya returned to his old way of addressing her.

“Then sorry for not able to assist you, do you mind going back to your room alone? You can call someone along the way to help prepare the bath immediately before you reach your room.”

“Understood.”

Tatsuya understood firmly that this was the end of their conversation. “Thanks for the coffee, it was delicious.”

Tatsuya bowed to Maya and Hayama, and left the study.

◊ ◊ ◊

Even after Tatsuya left, Maya had remained on the couch. “Madam, thank you for your hard work.”

Hayama said so to Maya from behind.

“Somehow, I became more emotional than I had planned.”

Maya reluctantly said so. For her, it was probably an apology for the previous one-act, her outburst of excitement.

“Since you were retelling that story, I think it couldn’t be helped.”

Hayama defended Maya with ‘it was a topic where you couldn’t avoid such excitement’, perhaps, that was embarrassing for her, Maya turned her face away with an ‘hmph’ expression which didn’t suit her age.

Even Hayama thought that it was funny, but he was not so careless as to show a smile on his face.

“So that was madam’s secret plan all along. This time, even I must accept that I have nothing but admiration.”

Last November, she immediately made a call for Tatsuya and Miyuki to come to the Manor right after the Yokohama Incident, Maya told Hayama ‘Miyuki must become the next family head to bind Tatsuya. I have some consideration in subjecting her to the family head seat’. She confided her plans to Hayama about the preparations for the New Year’s Gathering, which takes place tomorrow.

“Thanks to the variety of things that happened out of expectation, I got excited more than I thought. The rest depends on how far Miyuki-san, can go.”

“Whether she will become a great woman.”

The surprising remark came from none other than Hayama with a firm tone, Maya looked back at Hayama by twisting her body on the sofa.

Hayama displayed a good natured old-man smile.

“Both Miyuki-sama and Tatsuya-sama have to face their future feelings properly. Although Tatsuya-sama is heading into a place without an

enemy, he faces Miyuki-sama’s feeling straightforwardly without failure.”

“To honestly love would be my folly, I’d say.”

“In this case, it’s the one who is honest who wins.”

Hayama’s laugh and smile pulled Maya out from her own miasma.

◊ ◊ ◊

When Tatsuya returned, there wasn't anyone in the room. Miyuki must have been brought to the same home estate for tomorrow's preparations.

As Maya said, the guide for the bath came pretty soon. It was rare for him to stay overnight at the Main House, the bath was also quite different as it was his first time staying in a Japanese-style guest room. He didn't dress unsightly for the round trip to the bath as it was possible to run into someone. Tatsuya's bathing time was neither long, nor short. When he returned to his room, the clock was already pointing to 11 P.M., yet Miyuki hadn't returned.

Instead, he found out that the futon was already set.

In series to the Japanese-style room, a set of futon for pair, with two pillows.

"Onii-sama, sorry for making you wait." Miyuki returned at such a bad moment. "This is…"

While leaving the sliding door open, she looked at the state of the next room. If she looked into the room, it was natural to focus her eyes on… 'Miyuki, this isn't my do-…"

-ing, Tatsuya was not able to continue his excuse until the end. Perhaps, Miyuki was polished by a lot of servants until she shone, she was also only wearing underwear under her Hitoe. The bathroom was possibly very hot, as she didn't appear to be cold to wear so little despite it being mid-winter. The current blushed in her face and neck might appear to be caused by the heat, but it was obvious that the room temperature wasn't hot.

The reason for his loss of words wasn't due to the Hitoe. It was because of the strong charm of Miyuki cladded in that Hitoe, he somehow lost the time to explain and drifted to his speechlessness.

She already had a beautiful look, but now it seemed that she was actually shining.

Miyuki had the air of a refreshing inanimate scent, now she might actually attract not only butterflies and bees, she was wearing a subtle scent of a flower.

If she walked in Tokyo through a crowd as she was, there would be undoubtedly imminent large panic among the crowd.

Tatsuya without exaggerating thought so. "Onii-sama, this is…"

However, Miyuki was also in a not-so-calm state, and it was exaggerated with only one futon set out, those were the first words she emitted after she reboot her mind.

"No, this isn't my doing. It was already in this condition when I returned from the bath."

"I see."

Since he thought that he was restless with much standing. Tatsuya sat in front of the low table, Miyuki was also seated in front of the futon. As the sliding door leading to the next room, they felt conscious when it opened, yet felt strange to close it.

In front of Tatsuya, Miyuki seemed to be unable to calm down while combing her hair. Somehow, she was conscious of his gaze.

It couldn't be helped. It hadn't even been three hours since the shocking declaration that Tatsuya was to be Miyuki's fiancé. Taking into account, the bombshell that Tatsuya and Miyuki were not real siblings. It was unreasonable not to be conscious of each other right now."

"Umm, O-onii-sama."

Hesitation was felt in Miyuki's tone. Tatsuya raised his eyebrows in wonder. "What is it?"

"No, that… Onii-sama, can I still call you that? Or should I call you Ta- "

"I don't mind if you call me as usual."

As Miyuki didn't seem to be able to call him 'Tatsuya', Tatsuya rescued her with a laugh.

Miyuki smiled with a relieved face. However, his answer of 'as usual' wasn't only for Miyuki. Tatsuya wasn't going to keep up with the lie of 'Miyuki isn't my sister'.

"Then, Onii-sama… Have you already finished your discussion with Oba-ue?"

"Such a thing…"

The fact that I was here, such a thing was a given right, he was about to answer, but he soon realized that Miyuki's question had a different meaning.

"Yes, it's concluded. I have asked everything that I needed to know about from Oba-ue herself."

"I see. Then, about that…"

Miyuki was stammering. She was probably not hesitating. Just, hadn't enough courage to ask about the matter.

She summoned up the courage which had been void from her heart, Miyuki was finally able to ask Tatsuya.

"About Onii-sama and me not being real siblings."

——Is it true?

However, no matter how much courage she summoned, she wasn't able to say the decisive words from her mouth.

"A lie."

Tatsuya's answer was extremely brief.

Miyuki's heart was torn in two from that answer.

The feeling of relief that she was Tatsuya's sister, and that she wouldn't be able to marry Tatsuya as his sister.

"Why… Why did Oba-sama tell such a lie?"

"This is an over simplification of an explanation, but it seems like it was done in order to let us marry."

Maya's explanation was difficult to understand for certain, but Tatsuya understood more circumstances than Miyuki. However, he was wondering to what extent that he should reveal to Miyuki, Tatsuya hadn't really decided.

"Even though we're siblings?"

"Well, since the family registry and DNA analysis were just formalities."

"Well… That's true in light of the power that the Yotsuba Family has."

"There's no need to worry about genetic abnormalities of our future children either."

"Why, is that so?"

Miyuki who was facing down in a gloomy face, raised her face and fixed her eyes at Tatsuya. The white skin above her neck wasn't covered by the Hitoe, which made Tatsuya involuntarily want to look away.

However, thinking so would mean that he was walking into Maya's palm, so he regained the calmness in his mind.

With having regained control of his senses, Tatsuya stared at Miyuki's eyes again.

Miyuki's eyes looked as if she was ready to receive any kind of truth from him.

Maya had made the decision for Tatsuya to be Miyuki's companion, she had thought that Miyuki could bear such a weight.

As he acknowledged the readiness on her eyes, Tatsuya firmed his decision on the part that he should tell to Miyuki.

"You are, your body has no factor that can cause any genetic abnormality."

"You have, a modified body."

Miyuki stared with watchful eyes while covering her mouth with both of her hands.

Her long hair was shaking.

Tatsuya was a little relieved that she didn't show a frightened face.

"I have, a modified body…"

"You were made from Kaa-san's and Oyaji's fertilized egg, and with the Yotsuba's science, was made to have a 'perfect modified body', thanks to the best technology. You overcame all of the defects which come from having a modified body, you are the Masterpiece of the Yotsuba which has been completed as a human being, or more than human being.

Tatsuya's explanation wasn't supposed to be a consolation, the fact that she wasn't a human who was born naturally. However, for some reason, Miyuki visibly regained her composure.

Miyuki was neither upset nor scared, from the fact that she is a human being who had been artificially created. Miyuki knew now that her body, and life, was a gift she received from Tatsuya. The more she

thought about it, the more she was convinced that it was appropriate. That was why she didn't worry too much that originally her body was artificially created and such.

"Then, I… As long as I'm by Onii-sama's side, I won't suddenly fall into the netherworld right?"

The one things she was worried about was the limitation of her life as a woman with a modified body. Fear that she suddenly had exhausted her own life and couldn't be together with Tatsuya anymore.

"Judging from the way Oba-ue talked, it seems like your resistance to continuous magical use, is likely higher than my own."

"It means that… I can live alongside you, Onii-sama?"

"Judging from the way Oba-ue talked, it seems like you will have a long life."

In the end, after she was told that she could live as long as her brother, she didn't even care that she has a modified body.

"Onii-sama and I are siblings, but my genes are different from Onii-sama's."

Tatsuya felt like saying 'Hey…".

Certainly, Maya said that Miyuki has a modified body, genetically speaking, it was true that the relationship between Tatsuya and Maya was only that of nephew and aunt. However, between Tatsuya and Miyuki, there wasn't a single word that could deny their relationship.

Yet, Miyuki was saying the same thing as Maya.

Similarities aren't only brought about by genes… Tatsuya thought so.

"From the beginning, members of the Yotsuba Family were a human experimentation, with manipulated genes from the Fourth Laboratory. Although, it was different than that of a modified body, it doesn't change that we also have undergone genetic manipulation."

The way Tatsuya said that, was to emphasize the similarity between Miyuki and him.

However, Miyuki with her sleepy face, didn't seem to be able to digest these meanings well enough.

"Then, Onii-sama and I will be cousins from now on?" "At least in the eyes of others."

"Then, I can be engaged to Onii-sama, right!" Miyuki raised her voice in excitement.

However, her excitement didn't last very long. As she saw the confused look on Tatsuya.

"As expected, you must be disgusted…" "With what?"

Tatsuya couldn't figure out the reason why Miyuki was suddenly gloomy, he couldn't even understand the meaning behind her dark voice.

"Because, to Onii-sama, I'm still your sister right?" "Yes, because that's a fact."

For now, that fact was undeniable to Tatsuya.

"For a sister to want to be the bride of her own real brother, it is still abnormal right…"

"Miyuki, do you."

For a moment, Tatsuya thought that he heard wrongly. However, his five sense had been honed to a level beyond an ordinary person with training.

Miyuki definitely said 'for a sister to want to be the bride of her own real brother'. From the context, it could only be interpreted to be Miyuki and Tatsuya.

In other words, Miyuki…

“Ye-yes! It was not due to Oba-sama’s order only! I’m very happy to hear that i will be Onii-sama’s fiancé!”

Miyuki looked down while clasping her hands on her thighs. Her tears were falling on top of her hands, onto her thighs.

“Even now, that feeling hasn’t changed. Even though I know that Onii-sama is my real brother, I want Onii-sama to treasure me as a woman! I want to be Onii-sama’s bride! When I said I had given up, suddenly I didn’t want to give up!”

Miyuki’s voice wasn’t difficult to hear even if she was excited. However there were some things that were difficult to understand due to her excitement.

What she said about ‘when I said I had given up, suddenly I didn’t want to give up’, must be ‘I’d given up until I’d heard the story, now that you said we can get married, I don’t need to give up anymore’. Tatsuya had no clue at all that what Miyuki was worrying about were the things from earlier, that it surprised him. Certainly, Miyuki had shown an excessive amount of attention to him as her real brother. However, Tatsuya always thought that she was yearning for him only as a brother.

However, it might be because he, himself, only wanted to think only thus far.

Against Miyuki’s tears, Tatsuya had a suspicion that he was tamed by such things.

“But, Onii-sama is normal after all… You have a normal sense of moral too… You wouldn’t carry a romantic feelings for your own sister right. You must have been disgusted by such an abnormal sister like me…”

Miyuki finally sobbed.

It wasn’t a loud cry, but one that made the listener have a tight painful chest, she suppressed her sorrow so much that her cry was concentrated in the last minute.

"Miyuki…"

Tatsuya stretched a hand toward Miyuki timidly. Miyuki extended her hand to catch Tatsuya's hand.

Tatsuya thought that she would shake his hand. He thought it was natural to deal with him so, as he was the heartless big brother who didn't notice his sister's problem to the point that she cried in pain.

However, Miyuki grabbed Tatsuya's right hand with both of her hands. Then, she hugged it in her chest.

"O…"

Tatsuya tried to restrain her and say 'Hey, wait', but he stopped. He couldn't bring himself to say something that would refuse Miyuki too bluntly now. No, he didn't want to do so.

"Onii-sama, I, I…"

While grabbing his hand strongly, Miyuki desperately mustered her words out.

Mustering out her own feelings.

"Love, you. I love you. I'm in love with Onii-sama!"

The words Tatsuya always heard from his sister was 'I adore you'. It was his first time hearing 'I love you' from her.

Only a one-character difference, could change the weight of the words this much. Tatsuya only noticed this for the first time.

"It's fine even if you want to hate me for being such an abnormal sister! It's fine even if you consider that these bad feelings are an unnatural tendency! But…, please. I beg you Onii-sama…"

Miyuki raised her face, wet with tears.

Tatsuya had never seen such a sorrowful, such a desperate face, yet so beautiful.

“Somehow… Somehow… Please let me be by your side. Please don’t be detached from me. Please don’t disappear from my side!”

Even when she was crying, Miyuki didn’t distort her face. It was her beautiful face, with showering tears.

Today was the first time he knew this as well. Her sad crying face, Tatsuya thought.

While still entrusting his right hand to Miyuki, Tatsuya reached out with his left hand to Miyuki’s back.

“O-onii,-sama…?”

“I won’t disappear from your side.”

“Ah… Umm… Onii-sama, once more… One more time…” Miyuki asked so fearfully while being held with Tatsuya’s hand, in

Tatsuya’s arm, and pressing her face to Tatsuya’s chest. She wanted to hear those words again to affirm it.

“Miyuki. I won’t disappear from your side.” “Ah…”

Miyuki was overcome with her emotion, while all her energy was escaping from her body.

Tatsuya thought that he must answer his sister who entrusted all of her body to him.

“Until death do us part. I will be by your side.” “Although, it might not be in the sense that you desire.” “I still, can only see you as my sister.”

“You’re my cute little sister. I won’t think badly of such a cute little sister.”

“I also don’t think that you’re abnormal.”

“I will never reject you. I won’t detach myself from you.”

“However, Miyuki… That’s because I’m your brother. And because you’re my cute little sister.”

"That's why… Sorry. At the very least, I can only see you as my sister for now."

Miyuki, who was still held by Tatsuya's arms, got up after she heard his answer and released Tatsuya's right hand which she had been grabbed by and stuck it to her chest.

"That's fine."

There were traces of tears in Miyuki's face. However, there were no new tears flowing out.

"I'm satisfied for now."

Miyuki casually turned her hand to Tatsuya's neck, and embraced him. "Because, I also can only call you Onii-sama for now."

Miyuki put her cheek beside Tatsuya's cheek, while whispering in his ear.

"For Onii-sama to say 'for now' to my confession. It's sufficient enough for me."

Miyuki hugged Tatsuya with a strengthened force in her arms.

“Onii-sama, is it ok for me to hope? Not for ‘now’ but for ‘sometime’. For Onii-sama to be able to see me as ‘Miyuki’, and not your sister.”

Tatsuya also whispered into Miyuki’s ear in the same way. “This might sound strange, but I’ll try my best.”

Miyuki released her embrace. “Oh, dear, Onii-sama.”

Miyuki laughed with an amazed face. Tatsuya smiled wryly.

It was finally returning to the usual atmosphere of the siblings.

“Miyuki, it’s already late. We need to prepare early for tomorrow, let’s get some sleep.”

“Ah, that’s right. Then, I’ll ask for a futon.”

Miyuki was about to stand, but Tatsuya restrained her. “Onii-sama?”

“There’s no need for that. Oba-ue has kindly set this up. Let’s just sleep in the same futon for today.”

“Ehh!?”

Miyuki’s voice was overturned. Her voice wasn’t so overturned even when she was crying.

“U, umm, Onii-sama, is that, do you mean.” “No, you’re wrong.”

Tatsuya smirked wickedly at Miyuki.

“We’ll just sleep together. We won’t do anything else.”

“I… I see.”

Miyuki patted down her chest. There seemed to be a little regret in that gesture, Tatsuya wondered if she was expecting something.

“I’ll change into pajamas first. You can get into the futon first.”

“No… I can wait for you for a short while. Let’s get into the futon together, Onii-sama.”

“Understood. I’ll be back soon.”

Tatsuya had confirmed that this room was equipped with yukata for sleepwear. He needn’t get lost, and quickly took off his clothes and wore the yukata on top of his trunks.

“Onii-sama, don’t you feel cold?”

Miyuki asked anxiously when Tatsuya was going to get into the futon. “No, this it’s probably already warm enough.”

Tatsuya slipped into the futon, while signaling Miyuki.

Miyuki showed a slight hesitation before settling into using Tatsuya as an arm pillow.

“I wonder when it was. Once upon a time, when I was really young, I feel like, there was one instance when I was held in your arm.”

“It wasn’t such an old occurrence… It was on the day when Kaa-san’s funeral was over.”

“That’s… Right… That was so careless of me.” Miyuki rested her body on Tatsuya.

To embrace Miyuki's shoulder tightly, Tatsuya turned his other arm. “Onii-sama.”

“What is it?”

“Did Onii-sama really not know?” “Well.”

“About how much I’ve been suffering, that is.” “Sorry.”

“It is especially true in recent time. Society encourages magicians to marry early. If I’m to shoulder the status of being a magician, at the very least, I should have chosen a fiancé, or have prepared one.”

“That’s right.”

"Since siblings cannot marry each other. So, with another man besides Onii-sama…"

"Miyuki."

Tatsuya's hand stroked Miyuki's hair.

Miyuki's body was trembling in tension, although she immediately released this tension. And left her body to Tatsuya.

"Just go to sleep." "Yes, Onii-sama."

Miyuki entrusted her body and mind to Tatsuya, she fell asleep while listening to the distant sound of bells on New Year's Eve.

Chapter 7

2097 A.D., New Year's Day.

Both Tatsuya and Miyuki had been busy since they had awakened this morning.

Waking up early was no big deal since the two of them were both used to waking up early, but they were already fed up with being treated like Traditional Japanese Dress-up Dolls. Tatsuya was the same as always, and while Miyuki was capable of putting on her clothes by herself, neither of them have gotten used to having everything done for them even when it comes to changing clothes. Visibly showing that he did not wish to have his face puffed with powder, Tatsuya adamantly refused, but Miyuki could not help him. Well, it was not like he was going to have his face made all white like a stage actor; it helped that the application of the powder was only at the level of something for "Japanese clothes–version natural makeup."

At any rate, after being played around with for a full hour, by the time they were released, they felt like going home as they were.

"Tatsuya-niisan." "Miyuki-oneesama."

They were seated on the chairs in the anteroom——probably trying not to get creases on their clothes. Fumiya, who was in a haori hakama, and Ayako, wearing furisode——where they were discussing with the two while walking about despite the fair number of tall, four-legged chairs located in the anteroom, about whether preparations were finally over with.

“Tatsuya-niisan, Miyuki-san, Happy New Year.” “Tatsuya-san, Miyuki-oneesama, Happy New Year.”

The two people were polite in their New Year greetings, Tatsuya and Miyuki also started.

“Fumiya, Ayako-chan, Happy New Year. No, I can’t call you Ayako-chan anymore right?”

“Tatsuya-san, please don’t tease me on New Year’s Day. It’s alright. I make a special permit only for Tatsuya-san to call me ‘Ayako-chan’.”

“Fufufu. Fumiya-kun, Ayako-san, Happy New Year.” “Uwaa.”

The one who raised their voice was Fumiya.

“Miyuki-san, how should I put this… You look, extremely beautiful.” “I give up. That’s not how you do it.”

Fumiya was amazed that Ayako showed no hint of rivalry on her face, he wondered if she had convinced herself in treating Miyuki differently today because she’s the protagonist.

“Anyway, Miyuki-oneesama, that’s a wonderful furisode. It’s as if I’m looking at a bride at a wedding.”

Miyuki was unable to answer with anything but a bitter smile, since she herself also thought the same as Ayako, that her dress could fit for a wedding dress.

“I also think that this is exaggerating, but… I was convinced that I needed to wear this today.”

"Oh dear."

It was somewhat hard to judge whether that expression of shock by Ayako meant she was really shocked or she was really jealous.

"Madam Shirakawa must have thought that it is appropriate for us to wear the most formal attire because there will be the appointment of the next Family Head."

The one who made such a remark, was Yuuka, who was standing in her furisode.

"Yuuka-san, Happy New Year. Thank you very much for yesterday."

"Happy New Year, Tatsuya-san. Then, you're very welcome. Please don't mind about what happened yesterday."

Yuuka said so with a friendliness while approaching the spot where the other four were standing.

They exchanged New Year greetings, and seated themselves after Yuuka's proposal.

Even only with this many people gathered, the lobby seems to be a little cramped.

Then, as the room felt more and more cramped, the people who were not present yet had grown more and more—quite unnecessarily so—noticeable.

"Shibata-san, I wonder if he won't be coming."

The one who dared to raise the question, perhaps due to the fact that he was the youngest, was Fumiya.

"Looking at the time, he should have already arrived. Perhaps he would come together with his parents."

Tatsuya answered Fumiya with his conjecture.

The clock hung on the wall to remind them that they would soon be summoned.

As if to support Tatsuya's words, a housekeeper with a modest furisode came to summon them.

"Excuse me. I will be the one to guide you, I am Sakurai Minami."

The guide was Minami. The reason she was wearing that furisode was probably to distinguish herself in her role as their guide.

"I probably have a lot of shortcomings, but I shall serve you to the best of my ability, I will be in your care."

As Minami said, she did do her best. There were times when she was asking herself whether the others were just mistaken about her being a guide at the New Year's Gathering or whether she was misinterpreting the traditional culture with slight anachronisms, so it might have been embarrassing for her.

"Firstly, Fumiya-sama and Ayako-sama, please let me guide you."

Fumiya and Ayako stood and bid farewell to Tatsuya, Miyuki and Yuuka in such order.

Both of them followed Minami quietly as they matched their steps out of the lobby.

"By the way, Tatsuya-san, do you know about the entrance manner for the New Year's Meeting?"

Yuuka asked him this question at this late hour, but Tatsuya honestly answered her.

"I heard we will be summoned by someone and then be guided to make an entrance."

Upon hearing Tatsuya's response, Yuuka's face looked full of pity for him.

“Perhaps, Miyuki-san also doesn’t know?” “Yes, that’s as much as I’ve heard.”

“Then… Please take a piece of advice from me.”

Tatsuya and Miyuki both turned to Yuuka with quizzical looks.

Yuuka said it with a serious atmosphere.

“Upon entering, you must absolutely not burst into laughter. Once you’re able to hold it back, please promptly take a seat while bowing.”

It was only a short time before Yuuka was taken to the room. “Tatsuya-sama, Miyuki-sama, please follow me.”

Minami came back to the lobby to summon Tatsuya and Miyuki. “Minami-chan, are you alright? You look a little tired.”

As Miyuki said, Minami seemed to look a little tired.

“Yes, I’m alright. Sorry for my impertinence, but would you mind if we walked a little faster.”

But, she probably would get some rest after she finished this duty. Tatsuya thought that it would best to follow her lead in order to end Minami’s duty as soon as possible, Miyuki chose to follow his lead after being asked so by Minami.

“The next head family candidate, Shiba Miyuki-sama, followed by her older brother, Shiba Tatsuya-sama.”

Tatsuya felt his knees breaking when Minami made her proclamation. When he looked to his side, Miyuki was also soothing her knees.

Without a doubt, it would have been a shameful display had Yuuka not advised them.

The servants came to kneel low off the floor before the two simultaneously, meanwhile both Tatsuya and Miyuki found it increasingly more difficult to keep calm. Even then, Tatsuya and Miyuki knelt down in a noble manner, with Tatsuya behaving with a great pomp under the circumstances, and Miyuki with chastity and refinement, while taking her bow.

(Is this a test, how can we deal with this many formalities?) Tatsuya bowed while thinking over this matter.

Kneeling before the two, Minami whispered to them 'please take your seats'. After hearing that signal, Tatsuya and Miyuki raised their faces. The assembly went a little taken aback, and it was none other due to the beauty of Miyuki.

Guided by Minami, Tatsuya and Miyuki went to their seats. There was a commotion for the second time.

Tatsuya and Miyuki were led to the seats next to Maya. "Everyone, once again, Happy New Year to all of you.'

While declaring her proclamation, Maya who wore a splendorous black tomesode bountifully adorned with gold thread, despite the fact that she was not married; the commotion ended abruptly as the whole congregation said, "Happy New Year" in perfect chorus. Tatsuya and Miyuki also anticipated that, so they readied their voices without delay.

Maya looked around with a content look.

"Today, on top of the auspicious new year, I have another piece of good news to be delivered to everyone. This matter is something that has made my heart truly delighted."

With that introduction, Maya first turned her eyes to Katsushige. Beside Katsushige, who was donning a haori hakama just like Tatsuya and the others, uncomfortably sat Kotona who was donning a furisode just like Miyuki and the others.

“Katsushige-san, the eldest son of the Shibata Family, and Kotona Tsutsumi have recently gotten engaged.”

Huge cheers roared. Tatsuya tried to pick for some whispers from the crowds. There were more people who said “as I’ve thought” or “finally” than people who said “really”.

“From here on, it probably won’t be just happy times, there will be a lots of things you will struggle with, but please wish the young couple bountiful blessings ahead.”

An ovation broke out from the assembly. However, Tatsuya wasn’t able to ignore how before that there were a lot of people who nodded in agreement when Maya said ‘a lots of things you will struggle with’.

“Next, I shall be announcing what everyone has been most concerned about.”

The assembly went silent as if someone threw water at them. “Fufufu, it is as you have all thought.”

Maya smiled as if irritated.

Even so, there was neither a whisper nor a sound from the assembly. Perhaps, she was satisfied with this reaction, or may be dissatisfied.

Keeping up her secretive smile, Maya presented the name of the next family head.

“I would like to entrust the position of family head to our Shiba Miyuki here.”

There was vigorous clapping amid the ovation. It was particularly loud among the Main House’s servants.

“Let’s leave the congratulating process for another time. This New Year’s Meeting isn’t the place to do such a formal matter after all.”

Laughter of agreement arose from the assembly. Tatsuya gazed upon the crowd, he saw blushed faces in the man from the assembly. Tatsuya

realized with a little astonishment that people are out here drinking after all.

“And then, the final news. Miyuki, our next family head, welcomes on this occasion, my son, Shiba Tatsuya as her fiancée.”

Instead of applause, came a huge commotion. It was in no way whispering, it was exchanged conversations.

“Pardon me, Toushu-sama, but would you permit me to ask a question?”

The voice came from, Yuuka’s vicinity. The woman who wore a comfortable irotomesode, was Yuuka’s mother, the Tsukuba Family’s Head, Tsukuba Touka.

“Tsukuba-dono, what is it?”

Maya asked her with a calm questioning smile.

Touka asked her with a stiff expression bereft of calmness.

“You just said ‘my son’, but did I mishear that? As far as I remember, Tatsuya-san is the son of Miya-sama, Toushu-sama’s Onee-sama.”

“I see. This is a good opportunity, so I thought I’d introduce him as my son too. Shiba Tatsuya here, was born from my egg before that ‘Incident’, currently I’m acting as his adoptive mother in my sister’s, Miya’s, stead. I’ve asked for her permission beforehand, thereby, I introduce him as my son from now onwards.”

The commotion turned to silence. However, that was only for a moment.
“Toushu-sama.”

“Yes, Mitsugu-san. What is it?”

In this place, she ought to call the Branch House Family Head, as ‘Kuroba-dono’, but Maya dared to call him “Mitsugu-san” as she used to. Maya knew very well that it pressured Mitsugu.

“About the ‘welcome’ you’ve said just now…”

“Oh, that’s right. That was an expression that would attract some misunderstanding.”

In contrast to Mitsugu’s stiff expression, Maya hinted an almost mocking, light, deceptive smile.

“Tatsuya is just a second-year student at the First High School, so he will continue to live with the Shiba Family as he has always done. Be it as it may that he is engaged, I think it wouldn’t be moral for a male and a female high schooler to be cohabitating, but I am certain that no such indiscretion would be committed between Miyuki-san and Tatsuya-san.” “However…”

As he was just about to detail his opposition, Mitsugu closed his mouth. He noticed Fumiya who sat beside him who had been repeatedly asking Ayako, ‘Nee-san, are you alright’.

“Ara, Ayako-san, are you alright? Do you feel uncomfortable.” Maya spoke out earlier than Mitsugu.

Mitsugu was stunned out of guilt for his daughter. “Yes… I’m fine.”

Despite her firm reply, Ayako didn’t seem so in the eyes of the spectator.

“Would someone please take Ayako-san to another room to rest?” The one who responded to Maya’s clamor was Fumiya and Minami. “I will lead the way.”

“Please let me accompany her.”

Minami bowed at the entrance of the hall, while Fumiya wrapped his arms around Ayako’s shoulder while pleading to Maya.

“Yes, please.”

Maya gave the order to Minami. “Fumiya-san, you may be dismissed.”

Then, she turned to Fumiya while saying so.

◊ ◊ ◊

“Nee-san, I’m coming in.”

Fumiya knocked on the door of the room where Ayako was lying on a bed, having removed her Furisode and changed to more comfortable clothing.

Minami, who had been attending to her, opened the door from the inside. “Fumiya.”

“Nee-san, you can’t do this! Please get some sleep!”

Rushing up to Ayako confused, Fumiya put her to sleep as she tried to rise up from the bed.

“You’re exaggerating. It’s not like I’m sick.”

Ayako replied with a tired voice. However, she lied on her bed calmly even as she said that.

Not sick, Fumiya diverted his face at those words. However, he soon returned his eyes to Ayako who lied down on the bed calmly.

“Nee-san, umm… are you alright?” “What… Fumiya, you understand right?”

Ayako smiled in a face that was about to cry.

“I wonder if it was due to the fact that we’re twins. In times like this, I can’t hide anything from you.”

Fumiya showed a similar expression as Ayako.

Even if they’re twins, they came from different zygotes, since they have different genders, even their features are also different. The very girly

Ayako and androgynous Fumiya. Even if Fumiya wore the same clothes, make-up and hairstyle as Ayako, they wouldn't be mistaken for each other. However, they endured their tearful smiles and now made the same facial expression.

"It can't be expected, since we're against Miyuki-san. After all, Miyuki-san is the closest person to Tatsuya-niisan"

Fumiya implied that there was nothing they could do but to give up on Tatsuya. Ayako didn't respond to those words which implied that she liked Tatsuya.

"I never thought that Toushu-sama allied herself to Miyuki-san this much though."

"That's wrong, Fumiya."

Fumiya thought that Maya announced her stunt, saying that Tatsuya was her son, for the sake of Miyuki. However, Ayako denied it as being 'wrong' immediately.

"This is, for Tatsuya-san's sake." "Nee-san?"

"This isn't for Miyuki-oneesama. Toushu-sama is using Miyuki-oneesama in order to ensure Tatsuya-san's freedom and place."

"I wonder…"

Fumiya shyly received new strength from Ayako's words. He had probably created scenarios, which Miyuki was unsuitably chosen as Tatsuya's mate.

Ayako's words seemed to have landed at the right place, Fumiya's opportunity to know, finally disappeared.

◊ ◊ ◊

Due to Ayako exiting the room, the unexpected declaration that Tatsuya was Maya's son such as 'is it true', 'if it were, why did she hide it until now', which was the logical pursuit, was left unspoken and unanswered. Since it was unanswered, it also signified that Tatsuya's position as Maya's son and Miyuki's fiancée was also established.

Even so, it didn't mean that they could change their attitudes instantly from viewing him as the 'bastard' of the Yotsuba to 'the Son of the current Family Head' and 'the next Family Head's fiancé'. Even if they tried as much as they could on the surface, their disparaged attitudes oozed out at Tatsuya in words and actions.

However, Tatsuya had no intention to blame them for it. Since they were at a banquet now, and more importantly, he knew well enough back that this was a farce. That was why he'd rather show compassion to the branch families' members and the servants who couldn't change their attitudes instantly.

However, there was one servant who showed a different attitude.
"Tatsuya-sama, Miyuki-sama, this time congratulations."

Hayama, with his morning coat, bowed in prostration before Maya, in front of the two.

"Thank you."

Miyuki only returned a graceful 'thank you', but Tatsuya replied to him with a 'thank you, but please raise your head' since he felt bad from the exaggerated manners.

"I'm not familiar with Main Family's inner workings and traditions. I will need a lot of guidance from Hayama-san in the future."

In the end, it was only a play, but Tatsuya tried to follow along with an admirable verbal reply.

"I'm honored. Please ask about the things you are uncertain about to these old bones."

However, Hayama seemed resistant to end the play. "By the way, Tatsuya-sama, do you remember?"

Since they had no meeting regarding the script, he didn't have the idea of the topic at all.

However, Tatsuya didn't have to struggle to dig around his memory.

"I was told that you promised to show us your new magic at this New Year's Meeting."

As Hayama immediately told him the answer. "New magic? Tatsuya, have you completed it?"

Maya who paid no heed to the play and continued her meal asked him. This was not acting, but a genuine curiosity, and it was a given that she would do so.

"Yes."

Tatsuya successfully covered up the 'yeah, well' reluctant attitude in the precarious situation. Since he was in that situation, he couldn't bring himself to blame the employees.

"Really? Then, please let me see!"

Maya was ecstatic, like a little girl, forgetting her dignity as the Family Head.

Tatsuya was about to protest when he hinted at Hayama for something.

However, Hayama was smiling as if he was watching his grandchild, Maya, who had regressed and acted like a child.

"Onii-sama. Tatsuya-san, I also want to see."

For some reason, Miyuki decided to piggyback in this ruckus.

It was a perfect coalition.

“I understand. Since we are all here, why don’t we leave our seats for a while.”

Tatsuya had no longer any option to refuse their request.

Tatsuya, still wearing his Haori Hakama, pointed his CAD to the yard outside the hall venue.

To his opposite, a wild boar encased in a cage was placed.

Tatsuya began his explanation in a loud voice toward the audience in the venue.

“This new magic, ‘Baryon Lance’, is a magic with a lethality towards biological targets. For this reason, the demonstration will get a little bloody. If you are uninterested in any unnecessary killing, I propose for you to move to a separate room to relax for a while at your discretion.”

There were several people who withheld their face, yet not even one moved from their seat. The whole audience in this venue, after all, are people who were related to the Yotsuba.

“Then, I’ll start.”

Tatsuya took out the Silver Horn custom, ‘Trident’, which had been modified for this magic from the case, while wondering why he needed to show it like a juvenile freak show.

The pistol which usually used as a dual-style, but this magic only needed the right hand side of Trident, and further to the tip, there was a sword attached. It was pretty long, like a bayonet, which made the overall appearance of Trident rather unbalanced.

Tatsuya turned the tip of the bayonet at the wild boar in the cage. He drew the trigger as it was casually.

The magic processes started all at once, running in an instant.

[Material-Baryon Decomposition]

——Nucleus of the sword tip is decomposed. To decompose a nucleus, the molecule atom is decomposed into electrons and atomic nuclei, then the protons and neutrons in the nuclei are decoupled as baryons.

[FAE Process Execution-Particle Convergence]

——Particle group binding of physical law is reduced as the FAE Theory, crowded to a thin disk-shaped, spreading in accordance with the Laws of Nature. Lepton electrons are excluded from the defined target degradation and is trapping the protons.

[FAE Process Execution-Injection]

——Baryons that were condensed into a thin disk-shape, they shot towards the target. In accordance with the FAE theory, the mass of

baryons is moving at the speed of 10,000 km/s which exceeds the limit of magical force.

[Material-Regrowth]

——All of the processes are reversed.

“Eh?”

“What?”

“What has happened?”

Such voices were rising from the center of the audience, the wild boar immediately fell while rumbling the ground.

Of course Tatsuya, didn’t intend to give such a detailed explanation to the audience.

He bowed to the audience from Main Family, Branch Families and the Servants, he attempted to return his CAD and the bayonet attachment (actually, this was also a kind of CAD) to the case.

“Wait a minute.”

Unfortunately, a voice was withholding him from doing so. “What is it?”

The one who detained Tatsuya was Katsushige.

Katsushige got off to the yard, wearing wooden clogs. He closed in to the cage of the wild boar, while carefully staring at the corpse.

“Just now, it was high density neutrons right. The body tissue is boiling. Yet, for some reason, the cells of the body are not activated, how does such a phenomenon occur?”

“The how, is a secret.”

There was no way Katsushige didn’t know how to do that, but he threw some resistance just in case.

“Naturally.”

Sure enough, Katsushige was upset, sharpening his voice.

“Then, I will explain what kind of phenomenon just happened. That much is not so difficult.”

Tatsuya without any resistance, showed Katsushige his Trident with its bayonet attachment.

“This is a kind of armed device which combines CAD and a pile of carbon steel in a single activation.”

As he said, the attachment shape didn’t respond to ‘sword’, but rather like a ‘pile’.

“By decomposing part of this stake to the baryonic level, I can shoot the baryons which have been condensed into a thin disk-shape”

The base of this process was inspired by Angelina Sirius’s weapon, Brionac, which uses FAE Theory——of course, Tatsuya had no intention in revealing so much as a trick about the Free-After-Execution which he used.

“The tip portion seemed to have lost its form earlier, so it wasn’t my illusion.”

Katsushige immediately showed a convinced expression, while he began asking himself.

“That armed device is reduced to protons and neutrons? Electrons… ah, I see. The protons are tied with the electrons. So, instead of a charged particle beam, it becomes a neutron beam. Then, how come the tip portion remains plump?”

Tatsuya twisted his neck at Katsushige while wondering in his heart as to why he was so persistent to question this much to this extent.

“I completed the process with ‘Regrowth’.” “Tsk! I see, I see!”

“I see, so that’s the case!”

Overlapping with Katsushige’s voice from the yard was the satisfactory voice of Maya.

“That’s why you named it ‘Baryon Lance’. Not ‘cannon’ or ‘launcher’, not even ‘gun’, but ‘lance’, because you incorporated ‘Regrowth’ in the final stage of the magic, right?”

From Tatuya’s point of view, it was a matter of surety that she was able to guess that since he had already exposed much of the trick so far, but Tatsuya bowed admirably to Maya since she gave the right answer.

“There’s no remaining radiation of the substance, since all the injected neutrons emitted are recovered with ‘Regrowth’, right? The only trace of the attack is the moisture in the material, as it was heated to a high temperature. Tatsuya, it’s superb!”

Tatsuya lowered his head once more.

To Tatsuya who bent his upper body, Katsushige whispered to him in a voice that couldn’t be heard by others.

“Since you’re able to use such a magic, aren’t you able to scoff at us now?”

The reason of his persistent attitude from a little while ago, was this. However, this question was completely irrelevant.

Tatsuya pointed out mercilessly.

“’Baryon Lance’ is a magic that I created in order to fight an opponent that cannot be fought with ‘Decomposition’. I don’t have to use it on any opponent to whom I can use ‘Decomposition’.”

Katsushige fell silent and blushed. He understood completely the hidden message of, ‘it’s faster to use decomposition, while I can’.

Katsushige directed a sharp gaze at Tatsuya. However, he wasn’t fooled enough to go on a rampage here, whether for himself or the Shibata Family, or even Kotona who sat here as well. Katsushige sighed, while trying to push back his anger inside, he was impressed by the new magic, he returned back to his seat.

◊ ◊ ◊

The unveiling of his new magic ended safely this way. The matter about a ‘Neutron Barrier’ that Tatsuya was concerned about, if there’s anyone who objected about the entanglement, was courteously never asked.

He wondered if it was a stopper since they’re at the celebration dinner.

If the ‘Neutron Barrier’ was exposed, he would’ve had to reveal another stage of the secret, even Tatsuya sometimes had the feeling of relief in such situations.

The New Year’s Meeting itself ended without any more incidents. Tatsuya in an invisible relaxed manner, had rewritten his identity as the son of Yotsuba Maya, the current Head of Yotsuba Family, and the fiancé of Miyuki.

Then, the next day, January 2nd, 2097 A.D. The powerful magicians affiliated with the Ten Master Clans, the 18 Assistant Houses and the Hundred Families received a notice from the Yotsuba Family.

Shiba Miyuki was appointed as the next Family Head of the Yotsuba Family.

Shiba Tatsuya was the son of Yotsuba Maya. However, his name would be left as Shiba Tatsuya.

Shiba Miyuki and Shiba Tatsuya were engaged.

Many powerful magicians sent a congratulatory message addressed to the Yotsuba's post office box at the Magic Association.

However, not all of them had sent a congratulatory message. It was filed for the first time, January 3rd, 2097 A.D.

An objection to the engagement of Shiba Tatsuya and Shiba Miyuki to the Japan Magic Association Headquarters.

The objection was filed by Ichijou Gouki, the current head of the Ichijou Family.

(To be continued in 'Ten Master Clans Conference Arc')

Afterwards

How did you like 'Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei' Volume 16 'Yotsuba Succession Arc'? This 'Yotsuba Succession Arc' is a separate episode in the series, which will tie into the new developments.

Although it looks as if we've reached one of the endings of 'Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei', though it won't end in an ordinary way. I think you might imagine that the last two sentences are foreshadowing.

In Volume 16, there are new characters that have made appearances in their college years and working freshman. This novel focuses on High School as its center stage, so I don't think the non-high school characters will dominate the story.

——Although it's a different story altogether when they've graduated. Therefore, this afterword will be dedicated to touch on the new characters.

First, Tsukuba Yuuka-jou. 160 cm tall, weighing 48 kg, she has a little too thin of a body. She's 22 years old, and in her fourth year at Magic University. She was originally the Student Council Vice-President, in the generation before Mayumi's enrollment. She has straight black hair at shoulder length. She has six piercings in her left ear and a group of four in her right. She's a magician with a high aptitude in Mental Interference Magic in general.

Next is Shibata Katsushige-dono. He is 188 cm tall. Weighing 80kg. Katsushige has short, straight business-like black hair. He is 23 years old and has joined the Ministry of Defense this year after graduating from

Magic University. He is an Office Staffer, but he has high combat capabilities and a good physique as well. He's good at Convergence System Magic 'Density Manipulation', he is an excellent magician.

The third one is Tsutsumi Kotona-jou. She's 165 cm tall, weighing 58 kg. She likes to wear a brown medium sauvage.

At first glance, she's a girlish 24 year old lady. Her occupation is being Katsushige's Guardian. She's a second generation of modified body, 'Bard Series' who have a high aptitude in sound related magic.

Lastly, Tsutsumi Kanata-kun. He is 170 cm tall, and weighs 62 kg, a boxer type guy. He has maroon colored hair with a wolf cut. A 20 year old and a second year student at Magic University. He has a part-time job as a semi-professional musician in Live House, but he is a professed Guardian of Katsushige. The real brother of Kotona, he also has a high aptitude in magic related to sound.

Each of them has their own episode that can't be written here, but it's still completely undecided if they are going to be published.

This time as well, thank you for your company in reading up to here. Next time, the main stage will be the Magic High School again. The events surrounding the Yotsuba Succession have stirred up both their schoolmates. Including how the Ten Master Clans will move again.

Please look forward to ‘Mahouka Koukou no Rettousei’ Volume 17 ‘Ten Master Clans Conference Arc (I)’.

(Satou Tsuto